Youth unemployment
—a tale
of
two ghettos
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SINCE the early 1960's, the nation's unemployment rate has dropped precipitously in most cities; yet youth unemployment remains high, especially among Negro teenagers. Why this should be so has been a puzzle to scholars and public officials. In Houston, where I studied the Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC) over a one year period (between July, 1967 and August, 1968), the general unemployment rate had dropped to 2 per cent in the spring of 1968. A glance at the help-wanted ads of the metropolitan dailies revealed shortages of unskilled as well as of semiskilled workers. Yet youth unemployment seemed unaffected. The only possible explanation appeared to be that city youngsters could not adjust to the labor market because of (a) inadequate education, (b) lack of knowledge about jobs, of (c) the difficulty of getting to distant suburban businesses. One possibility we failed to contemplate: that

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many lower class youths, both white and black, are unemployed or subemployed for the same reasons that many middle-class college dropouts are: they can afford to be, and they prefer to be.

A white ghetto

Earlier on, when I was doing research on Appalachian migrants in a northside Chicago slum in 1965, it turned out—thanks to the heavy demand for semiskilled workers—that most of these migrant families were making a good economic adjustment. Most of them were earning $90 to $130 a week in Chicago; they had earned $35 to $40 a week back home, when they could find work. Some were intensely hostile to the news media because they were continually depicted as poor and unemployed. They were not affluent by any means; but neither were they poor or unemployed. (Some men felt they had to show me their pay stubs to prove they earned as much as they claimed—just in case I happened to be a reporter and not a student researcher!) The documentaries I saw on TV described these same Appalachians in the customary jargon of the urban crisis: “fester- ing despair,” “uprooted,” “jobless.” To be sure, there were depressed slum residents in this ghetto, but these were the elderly poor, the disabled, the alcoholic derelicts, and many were native Chicagoans. Since these people had lots of leisure, their presence in the slum was more visible during the day, when TV documentaries are filmed. But I suspect that, in any case, the documentaries were intended to educate the public to the fact that white Anglo-Saxon protestants can be just as lower class as southern Negroes, and that the facts about this particular ghetto were a secondary consideration.

Inadequate formal education was no handicap to the Appalachians, though most had less than ten years of formal schooling in the rural border states. Nobody at the plants had cared whether they had a high school diploma, either because most semiskilled industrial jobs do not require much education or because, in a tight labor market, employers have no choice. However, the really interesting fact is that adolescent Appalachians worked just enough to get by. The boys wrinkled their noses at the mention of Neighborhood Youth Corps jobs, or at day labor jobs paying $1.25 to $1.50 an hour. They thought these latter fit only for “wineheads.” As the NYC representative working in the neighborhood put it:

The kids in the Youth Corps have to have something wrong with them. The normal kid isn't going to work for $1.25 an hour, 30 hours a week. So the ones who can't get the better paying jobs, kids with police records or emotional problems, are the ones we get.
Since the southern white teenagers knew they could get jobs anytime they chose, it is reasonable to think that Chicago's labor shortage actually increased their indiscipline because they felt just as secure when not working as when they did work. Some took a distinctly cavalier attitude towards jobs. Most worked a few weeks at a stretch to earn enough to support their street corner activities, pay for room and board, and buy occasional luxury items. The reason they, and not the older men, were subemployed is simple: the boys did not have to support families.

Unemployment among married men in this ghetto was low. Among unmarried youth, it was high. No complicated explanation is necessary. For these unmarried southern boys, it was fun to socialize in the coffee bars, shoot pool, and gather in neighborhood service centers, whose activist staff could parade them before curious visitors as proof of "how the society's economy had failed the southern white." Most of these boys knew about the available industrial jobs, and how to get them. A boy could work as a service station attendant in the neighborhood for $1.65 an hour, but he also knew that if he wanted to make big money he had to get to the suburbs. It did take more effort: arrangements with car pools had to be made and one had to get up earlier in the morning. But the married men were doing it, and the boys could have easily followed suit, had they wished to. 1

There is another consideration. So long as lower class youth find "action," of one form or another, on the streets, they may continue to opt for leisure despite government efforts to move them into jobs. It is possible that some government and privately-sponsored projects by offering a new "action," actually increase the likelihood that youths will choose the pavement over the plant. I witnessed this phenomenon in the northside Appalachian ghetto. No more than a handful of southerners were attracted to a community union run by student radicals. It was mostly the disabled, the elderly, and the alcoholic who attended meetings. However, after student and ex-student organizers got to know youths who hung out in one of the centers, they taught them the new "action" of group picketing against local landlords and district police stations. Though one

1 Francis Caro, The Neighborhood Youth Corps and the Community (mimeographed), U.S. Department of Labor, September 1966, pp. 37-38. Caro came to the same conclusion on the basis of a study he conducted on Milwaukee's NYC. "Since there is currently a persistent demand in the city for unskilled workers, youth unemployment requires some explanation. An initial question might be raised as to the extent to which nonworking youth actually seek employment. . . . The small number of male youth served by the out-of-school NYC program suggests that the project is not substantially making an impact on this problem group . . . disinterest in working for as little as $1.25 an hour, dislike for menial labor, and reluctance to accept the discipline required for steady employment probably all contribute to keep nonworking male youth out of the NYC."
might think collegiate radicalism culturally alien to youths who liked
to joke about “niggers” and “faggots,” it was the novelty of the action
that counted and not the content of the ideology. In addition, young
intellectuals were an added novelty to them because they knew big
words and had abstract thoughts about life and society. Boys would
ask to be taught big words which they would then practice on one
another in grotesque contexts. After the students got to them, one
youth who had known me for a long time collared me in the center.
He explained that my coat and tie were “bourgeois.” Youths were
open to mobilization for the same reason some alcoholics and elderly
poor were: they had time on their hands.

The experience of the NYC

The enrollment in the urban NYC provides symptomatic data on
the job prospects of ghetto youths, and especially of Negro youths
who often predominate in city NYCs. Enrollment statistics tell us
clearly which youths want or need government-subsidized employ-
ment. It is reasonable to assume that those who do are the ones who
have fewer or less favorable options in the private sector.

From the start, Houston’s NYC program for school dropouts was
overwhelmed by female applicants, who came to make up between
75 and 80 per cent of the total enrollment. Negro females alone
made up close to 60 per cent of the enrollment and a majority had
one or more small children to support. Statistics on turnover show
that boys who did enroll stayed less time, on average, than females.
Some researchers have argued that this is because NYC jobs are
usually better suited to girls, which is true, but this was not the
case in Houston, where many good training jobs were obtained
specifically for boys. These training jobs often went begging because
of the low and unstable male enrollment. Moreover, when the Man-
power Development Training Act (MDTA) was introduced, the
special courses for boys in welding and auto mechanics had to be
dropped because the counselors could not guarantee that enough
boys scheduled for the courses would still be enrolled when the
courses got underway.

It is also significant that, of the small number of males, over half
were 16 or 17 years of age, although any qualified youth between 16
and 22 was eligible. (The distribution of females, by comparison,
was more even; only 28 per cent were as young as 16 and 17.) The
sharp decline in male enrollment at age 18 supports the findings of
our Appalachian ghetto in Chicago. Boys break the age barrier at
18 and can then get the better paying blue collar jobs, if they want
jobs at all. The female, by contrast, is not affected as much by this
age barrier, because many of these blue collar industrial jobs are
not open to her regardless of her age.
If we look at the projects for youths still in school, we have a good, controlled comparison. Unlike the out-of-school program, the in-school projects had equal numbers of males and females, and a heavy backlog demand for admissions among both sexes. Yet the training jobs offered were not as good as those provided by the out-of-school sponsors. Most appeared to be makework jobs in school libraries and recreational facilities; jobs which school youths took for 10 hours a week after school or on weekends. In contrast, the NYC projects for dropouts offered many semiskilled training jobs in places like universities and medical research centers—for example, PBX operator, offset printer, film processor, X-ray technician, nurses’ aide, animal surgery aide, orderly, clerk-typist, to mention just a few.

Why then was it so hard to enroll young men?

Clearly, boys still in school find unskilled jobs paying $1.25 an hour attractive, because those are the only jobs they can get, so long as they remain in school. Male dropouts, on the other hand, have a wider range of job choices in the private sector. One NYC job counselor received numerous calls from firms for youths 18 and older; no high school diploma was required. The jobs, some starting at $2 and more per hour, went unfilled because he didn’t have the male trainees to graduate into these jobs.

NYC counselors expected equal enrollments of males and females, on the reasonable assumption that ghetto poverty did not discriminate between the sexes. They subsequently vigorously defended, against all evidence and experience, the thesis that males had the same demand for the program: “We know the boys are out there.” They explained the discrepancy by arguing that the Negro woman had always been able to get some kind of job in the city, but the Negro man had always been discriminated against and relegated to menial work paying too little to maintain a stable working-class family life. The counselors reasoned that even though better opportunities had opened up for males, the traditional pattern of male dependency on the female had become too ingrained. Some came right out and said this: “We know the boys are around because we see them driving up on payday to pick up the girls.”

Wanting to correct this situation, the counselors took extra trouble to enroll youths. After all, the federal contract did call for an equal division of training slots between the sexes. Though girls were often kept waiting because the female quota was filled, any qualified young man was immediately accepted. A special field recruiter, with good contacts in the neighborhoods, was hired to bring in youth. Of several hundred contacted only a handful showed up to enroll. He knew why. Most males wanting work could earn more than $1.25 an hour.

The application forms filled out by entering trainees showed that some adolescent females had worked for as little as $.60 and $.70 an
hour in ghetto cafes and laundries, or as babysitters. Carhop, busgirl, waitress, hospital worker—all these jobs netted only from $35 to $40 a week for many girls. The applications filled out by males showed they were already earning, or had previously earned as much or more than the NYC wage. Thus it is not surprising that youths experienced less satisfaction with the program and were frequently heard to complain about the NYC pay.

In truth, the Houston NYC was not fighting youth joblessness but something else. As concerns the females, it was fighting itself: the pay scales and working conditions it offered were usually superior to those available outside. Girls working as trainees in hospital dietary and laundry departments frequently were offered full-time jobs by their supervisors, but rejected them when they learned that they would have to take a slight cut in pay and work a 40 hour week. Some females who had taken a special home nursing course were found jobs in private nursing homes. Counselors should not have been surprised when these young women sought to be readmitted to the program; they were being offered $1 to $1.15 an hour at the nursing homes. Adolescent females who were graduated into blue collar jobs at several upholstering and furniture companies and at one rag manufacturing concern started at $1.60 to $2 an hour; but most returned to the NYC seeking to be readmitted. They said the work was too hard, the buildings were stuffy, and they had to stand on their feet all day. Factory discipline was un congenial to them. Working in a day care center, by contrast, had given them opportunities to socialize with friends, play pop records on the center phonograph, listen to transistor radios and take short shopping excursions to nearby stores during lunch. Though the work was menial (involving cleaning up after the children), the job was not as arduous as factory work. Since these graduated trainees were willing to take a cut in pay to reenroll in the NYC, they must have viewed the community service jobs offered by the NYC as having fringe benefits not available in industrial jobs. The leniency of the counselors toward absenteeism due to child-rearing responsibilities—children had to be taken to clinics or baby sitters turned out not to be available on a certain day—was a fringe benefit of the program. So was the 32 hour week. As concerns the young men, what the NYC was fighting was, quite simply, the fact that those who wanted work in the first place could get better paying jobs elsewhere.

Perhaps Houston was unique. In depressed rural areas and cities facing industrial decline, young males may well have been attracted by simple work experience at $1.25 an hour. Nationwide, male enrollment in Fall, 1966 was approximately equal to female, which suggests the Houston experience may not be broadly representative of the overall NYC effort.

The fact that Houston's tight labor market provided jobs for
ghetto youths and adults alike radically altered the original mission of the NYC. The directors and counselors realized that if their program was to succeed, i.e., enroll the requisite number of youths, they had to provide something that was better than the jobs the youths had had before or could now get on their own. Thus not only did the program compete with private employers of the unskilled, it also began giving preference to “workstations” that would provide training in jobs with higher status than unskilled work. Counselors also soon came to rank employers in terms of their prestige and the quality of the training offered.¹

One gets the impression that federal policy-makers viewed the NYC as a kind of local conservation corps, akin in respects to the Civilian Conservation Corps set up under the New Deal in the 1930s. School dropouts could be put to work in parks and other recreational facilities, or in school libraries, and thereby make a contribution to local educational and beautification efforts at no cost to local taxpayers. One project had started out by allocating approximately 100 of a total of 200 training slots to the County Flood Control Department, on the assumption that half the enrollment would be male and that NYC should adhere to the policy of placing youths in non-competitive jobs on conservation and beautification projects. For a short while, several dozen boys hacked away at the brush and weeds that had sprouted up along the drainage canals. This was hot, heavy work and there was high turnover in the project. A perceptive counselor explained that any boy who wanted outdoor physical labor could do much better than $1.25 an hour. Very soon, the staff shifted all their training jobs to indoor workstations that were better suited to the large numbers of females seeking to enroll.

The shift from simple work experience to vocational training for higher-status jobs resulted from the NYC’s need to compete with the employers who were opening up unskilled jobs to youths. The tight labor market provided another unanticipated boon to the NYC. Many nonprofit agencies were less resistant to accepting low income youths as temporary workers because they had their own manpower shortages. Hospitals, especially, were short of workers. An agency like the Red Cross or YWCA could not compete with private industry for the best clerical workers, because they couldn’t afford to pay as much, and the tight labor market added to their difficulty. Many of the municipal agencies also paid low wages relative to

¹ However, the elimination of menial workstations was limited by the fact that many girls were too deficient in education or intelligence to cope with semi-skilled office work. A girl who functioned at the fifth grade educational level could not be made over into a clerical worker in six months time, or even a year. Since they enrolled, and had to get something, jobs providing only “work experience” were kept open for them. But even in this case, counselors preferred agencies that would hire at least some of these “low level” girls after their time in the NYC expired.
private industry, and this favored the female NYC worker in gaining access to the job market. Since the prestige corporations could insist on a typing speed of 60 or 70 words per minute for clerical workers, which very few NYC girls, even those upgraded by the MDTA clerical courses could match, the municipal and nonprofit agencies were the second best alternative for girls graduating into permanent office jobs. These agencies could not insist on the high standards set by private businesses.

Thus, the counselors' effort to open up large numbers of white collar training jobs in nonprofit and government agencies was rational. The NYC acted as a benign "trojan horse." If these agencies had been obligated to hire trainees after their six month to one year stint, probably very few would have wanted to cooperate with the project because they would not have wanted to hire lower class females, many of them Negro. However, as trainees, many girls had a chance to prove their ability to handle the clerical work given them. Some got permanent jobs at their agencies, or, when an agency did not have sufficient funds to hire, supervisors would contact friends in other agencies until a job was found. The NYC gave the intelligent and motivated Negro female the chance to move from unskilled service work to a semiskilled office job at the occupational periphery of middle-class society. The rise in status was accompanied by a rise in earnings, from the $200 she earned previously to perhaps $275 to $300 a month.

NYC counselors were right in assuming that they could do something for the motivated Negro female who had at least ten years of schooling, good grooming, and typing experience. Some brighter girls who enrolled would have succeeded on their own, no doubt, had they graduated from better high schools or had they prevented the pregnancy that made it necessary to leave school. Still, NYC was there, and it helped.

But because the morale of counselors depended on getting youths into better jobs, and not just into any job, the mission of the NYC was distorted from what both policymakers and the public had expected. Not work experience but upward mobility—mainly for Negro females—became the guiding ideal for the out-of-school programs.

**Negro unemployment reconsidered**

Just four years ago, Herbert Gans wrote:

All the available evidence indicates that since the Civil War, Negro male unemployment has almost always been higher than female. The gap has been widened further in recent years, especially in the cities as job opportunities have increased for women, while decreasing for men, due to an ever-shrinking supply of unskilled and semiskilled work and the continuing racial discrimination in many trades. Since Negroes
are moving to the cities in large numbers, the trends which Moynihan reports are likely to continue in the years to come.3

Elliot Liebow’s study of Negro streetcorner men in the early 1960’s supports the widely-held assumption that Negro males fare poorly in the urban job market. Most men, he concluded, could not find jobs paying enough to support families.4 However, Washington, D.C., the scene of his study, is unique among large American cities in having very little light or heavy industry, and this alone might account for the restricted job opportunities he found.

Though it is still popular to think that Negro women fare better than men, the most recent evidence indicates that the opposite is true. The expansion of blue collar jobs, already in progress when Gans and Liebow wrote, has speeded up the Negro male’s entry into industry to the point where his economic position is superior to that of his female counterpart. These gains in the relative position of Negro males are noted in the April 1968 Manpower Report of the President which reports that Negro females had a higher unemployment rate than males.

It is the Negro female who is handicapped, and who therefore finds the NYC an attractive alternative to unskilled service work. She is less likely to possess auto transportation than her male counterpart, and this cuts down on her range of job choices. Her child-rearing responsibilities make her less reliable. If her absenteeism is acceptable to those who employ unskilled service workers, this may simply be because they take whomever they can get in a tight labor market. They pay the lowest wages.

The point needs stressing: it is not simply that young Negro males do better than females, all other things being equal; they do better even when they have less education. “No experience necessary” the Houston newspaper ads for shoptrainees read—jobs that started at $2.35 an hour. Some of the better-educated girls enrolled in the NYC to get office work and raise their status. But the most that those fortunate enough to land clerical jobs could earn was $275 to $350 a month. Many males, by comparison, could earn this much with less education; most can earn more after passing the age barrier to semiskilled jobs. Since semiskilled: industrial jobs generally pay higher wages than semiskilled office jobs, and much more than menial service jobs, one should expect the job-oriented Negro male to be doing better than his female counterpart. And this explains why females were clamoring to get into the NYC, whereas youths kept aloof.

On the basis of my experience and research, I would suggest to public officials and others who are concerned about youth joblessness that they try out a new set of assumptions:

1. Many boys are underemployed and subemployed because they value leisure as much as money, which leads them to seek only as much work as is needed to get by with enough of each.

2. Because many youths support only themselves, their preference for underemployment may be based on a reasoned calculation of self-interest. Why should we expect ghetto youths to settle down at age 17 or 18 to the discipline of a year-round-full-time job that, in effect, denies them the leisure for "identity-building" we extend to college youths?

3. For male youths who want the better-paying industrial jobs, it is age not education that is the main barrier. It is child labor laws and insurance regulations, not ghetto school systems, that should be looked into.

4. Poverty in the ghetto may not discriminate between the sexes and the ages—all live in the same substandard housing and come from low income families—but job opportunities and earning power do. Ghetto youth cannot be considered a homogeneous group, all of whom are equally handicapped in getting jobs because all share low levels of education. Antipoverty efforts like the NYC have begun to adjust to this fact. In 1969, the decision was made to restrict NYC to youths 18 years or under because they have the most difficulty getting adult jobs, and to emphasize more useful vocational training with the MDTA program.

5. Just as poverty youths cannot be lumped together, neither should all cities with ghettos. Houston is not Washington, D.C. The above conclusions may only apply to metropolitan areas with substantial heavy and light industry, and those enjoying a healthy rate of economic growth in the past decade. On the other hand, they may have wider application. One would like to see some serious research that would settle this point.