ARE BLACK AMERICANS gradually becoming part of mainstream society? Or is the nation following the Kerner Commission's prophecy and moving toward separate black and white societies? There are plenty of facts, but not all point in the same direction. During the last twenty-five years, earnings of black men and women rose much faster than those of whites. But black poverty is three times more prevalent than white poverty. We see blacks becoming teachers, reporters, lawyers, judges, and mayors, but we also read about high rates of black crime, illegitimacy, welfare dependency, and drug abuse. In most big cities, people are afraid to venture into poor black neighborhoods or to have their children attend largely black schools.

What do social scientists make of the confusing picture of genuine black economic progress taking place alongside the rise of a black underclass? Little agreement exists among academics, despite thousands of sociological and economic studies and an abundance of data. Until recently, the view of blacks as victims was the dominant one in respectable academic circles. According to this view, blacks have made limited progress and continue to suffer economic hardship because of still pervasive racial discrimination. The cause of their problems, it is held, is the economic and social constraints blacks encounter, not their responses to those constraints. The black urban poor do not constitute an underclass that engages in self-destructive behavior; instead, the poorest families have unusual strengths that permit them to survive in the face of social injustice.

Moderate and conservative scholars agree on a different set of facts: the dramatic economic and social progress of middle- and upper-income blacks, and the tragic breakdown of the inner-city black community. They differ on how to explain these trends. Moderates emphasize the role of social and economic factors, while conservatives argue that the breakdown of constructive middle-class attitudes is the primary culprit.

THESE TWO BOOKS fall broadly into the liberal and moderate camps. Reynolds Farley and Walter Allen present a comprehensive but segmented analysis of black-white differences in popu-
lation trends, fertility and family structure, location and migration, education, employment, occupational achievement, family income, and earnings. Their book is one of a series promoted by the Russell Sage Foundation and the Social Science Research Council to convert the vast array of data from the 1980 Census into analyses of important trends in American life. Although the book relies heavily on Census data, the authors draw on non-Census sources as well. At its best, the book discusses the historical forces influencing socioeconomic indicators, provides rich detail on black-white differences, examines competing explanations for trends, and develops original new tests of hypotheses.

The disciplined reader can learn a great deal from the sheer volume of data and the sensible way in which it is used. Thus Farley and Allen, relying on age-adjusted trends in death rates by cause, inform us that deaths of black men by murder and accidents declined substantially between 1970 and 1983. Another surprise, derived from 1980 Census data, is that residential segregation was as pronounced among high-income as among low-income black families. A third striking phenomenon is that by 1980, black women had progressed to the point of earning as much as white women, whereas black men still earned only 62 percent of what white men earned. Most of the male earnings gap resulted from differences in education, experience, regional distribution, and work hours.

In a chapter comparing economic and social differences between native-born and foreign-born blacks, Farley and Allen attempt to refute Thomas Sowell's argument that the economic success of West Indian blacks proves that frugality, hard work, and entrepreneurial traditions are more important than race. The Farley-Allen tabulations reveal that in 1980, foreign-born blacks did only slightly better than native-born blacks in terms of education, income, occupation, and family stability. Although these are interesting and important findings, it is not clear that they refute Sowell's argument. If, for example, the difference in results stems from the massive inflow of Haitians between 1970 and 1980, Sowell's argument might retain its validity concerning other West Indian subgroups.

Farley and Allen focus mainly on the question of how much convergence has taken place in economic and social conditions. They find that differences between blacks and whites have narrowed in mortality, fertility, educational attainment, earnings, and occupational status. In other indicators, such as family income, blacks have gained little relative to whites during the last twenty-five years. Most troubling are indicators of a decline among blacks in quality of life since 1960: employment of adult black men declined, and the share of children living with both parents fell dramatically, from 80 to just over 40 percent.

Farley and Allen describe but do not explain the deterioration amid progress (although proof of a broad theory may be too much to ask). A fairer criticism is that the authors place too little emphasis
on the widening economic and social gaps within the black population. The book highlights differences between blacks and whites, when it should have said more about the differences among blacks. Instead of separate analyses of employment, occupation, and earnings, the authors could have examined the overall labor-market performance of various subgroups within the black population. Such a focus might have led the authors to pay more attention to the disastrous effects of violent crime and drug abuse, which have become so commonplace in urban black communities. It is hard to understand how a book on the quality of life of American blacks can regard these as minor issues.

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON confronts the problem head-on. He bluntly documents the catastrophic and fundamentally novel situation in urban black areas. During the 1940s and 1950s, even in Harlem, “there was crime . . . , but it had not reached the point where people were fearful of walking the streets at night, despite the overwhelming poverty in the area.” Wilson is not afraid to use the phrase “tangle of pathology” in describing the crime, out-of-wedlock teenage childbearing, and welfare dependency in black urban areas. In fact, in his first chapter, he chides liberals for denying the rise of a black urban underclass. Traditionally, liberals have believed that those pointing out socially destructive behavior by blacks were “blaming the victim”; that the family disruption and widespread illegitimacy of ghetto blacks represented resilient, adaptive behavior; that if rampant criminality and drug abuse took place, the cause was racism. These positions, and the ferocity of the attacks on Daniel P. Moynihan for his report on the black family, made liberals reluctant to study underclass issues, leaving the field to conservatives alone.

According to Wilson, conservatives are right to bring out the reality of, and destruction wrought by, the black urban underclass, but wrong to blame liberal social policies for creating the problem. In the first part of his book, Wilson develops an alternative explanation, which goes beyond the reactive position liberals had formerly taken as a result of stigmatization that limited serious scholarship.

Wilson’s argument and evidence are interesting and complex, but are not so coherently presented as one might have hoped (perhaps because the book is largely a series of related essays, some previously published). Wilson disposes of racism as the primary factor in the persistence of a black underclass by pointing out that the economic position of poor urban blacks deteriorated when sweeping antidiscrimination programs were implemented, and when the black middle class was making rapid progress.

If not racism, what did create and sustain the underclass? Wilson’s story begins with the labor market. During the 1970s, when the supply of low-skilled urban black workers increased (as an indirect result of the waves of migration and baby boom of the 1950s), the
pool of jobs for inner-city, low-skilled workers was declining and creating high unemployment. At the same time, well-educated blacks found good jobs because of the expanding demand for middle- and high-skilled workers, and because civil-rights legislation reduced discrimination and promoted affirmative action. As educated blacks obtained the means to enter the middle class, they left the urban ghetto areas, leaving behind a community made up mostly of poor blacks. The high concentrations of poor blacks created the conditions for a self-perpetuating underclass. Young people no longer had links to a job network or expectations that education would provide the key to a middle-class income and life-style. Instead, they turned to welfare and the underground economy. Given the scarcity of employed black men, young women found fewer suitable partners for marriage, which made childbirth out of wedlock more acceptable to them. The families of these women provided a new base of poor fatherless children, who grew up in communities that lacked both connections to jobs and a middle-class leadership to fight against crime and disruption in the schools.

Wilson's explanation is persuasive, but it is also surprisingly similar to the conservative view. For conservatives, the crucial ingredient is the role of attitudes in shaping the initial responses of blacks to social and economic conditions. The conservative argument would run as follows: When the labor market worsened for unskilled workers in inner-city communities, why didn't blacks simply make the best of the situation by accepting low-wage jobs or commuting longer distances? When crime became widespread in black communities, harming the prospects of a local black service sector, why didn't black leaders focus on expanded law enforcement and neighborhood patrols? When young black women saw that they might not find a suitable mate by their mid-twenties, why didn't they delay having children out of wedlock until they were sure that they could not marry a man with a stable job?

Notwithstanding Wilson's differences with conservatives on whether labor-market shifts, changes in black expectations, or a combination of the two factors were originally responsible for the growth of an underclass, Wilson's analysis of the current situation assigns a large role to attitudes. He claims that inner-city life generates behavior associated with "a life of casual work (tardiness and absenteeism)." These norms develop because urban blacks live in neighborhoods in which most families lack a steadily employed breadwinner. Young black women find out-of-wedlock childbearing acceptable. For Wilson, it is not a culture of poverty but social isolation that generates these negative norms and responses to economic conditions. Although Wilson admits that cultural traits are relevant to behavior, he argues that social isolation can be reversed through appropriate changes in public policy and improved economic opportunities.
In the second part of his book, Wilson argues that universal—as opposed to race-specific or income-targeted—policies are most likely to solve the underclass problem. Race-specific policies—whether they call for equal opportunity or for preferential treatment—tend to help the more advantaged members of the minority community, since only they can qualify for preferred positions. Although affirmative-action programs have helped some less advantaged minorities obtain jobs in law enforcement, construction work, and crafts jobs in large companies, “ghetto underclass individuals are severely underrepresented among those who actually benefited from such programs.” Income-targeted programs lack long-term political support and have too marginal an impact on the job opportunities of black men.

Wilson’s strategy is to implement policies that appeal to the more advantaged groups of all races, but that have an especially large impact on the ghetto underclass. Wilson wants the U.S. to move toward the European model of social policy, whose key elements are full employment and a national labor-market strategy, perhaps involving training programs integrated with the education system (as through apprenticeships). He also favors other broad-based programs, such as child-care credits, assured child-support payments (even if the state collects nothing from the absent father), and family allowances. And despite his criticism of race-specific and income-targeted programs, he wants to maintain these programs as well.

Although I am sympathetic to Wilson’s general argument, his discussion does not draw on policy lessons from past American and Western European experience. Further, it fails to deal adequately with two critical questions. First, how will Wilson’s proposals have a major impact on the underclass? Wilson goes little further than pointing out that improving the job prospects of men will strengthen black families and permit absent fathers to contribute more to the care of their children. Yet will modest improvements in job options be able to compete with the much more lucrative possibilities of the underground economy? Will they persuade gang members to give up attempts to dominate the schools and streets? Research on the experiences of cities with full employment could help answer these questions. So far, we have little ground for optimism.

A second problem is the potential conflict between achieving full employment without inflation and adding universal programs to the existing array of income-tested programs. Wilson does not address the main criticism of universal programs—their high costs. More important, he does not recognize that of the Western European welfare states, only a few small countries have been able to sustain both a full-employment economy and a generous social-welfare system.

One comes away from reading these books with an ambivalence about the present and future condition of American blacks: opti-
mism from the recognition that millions of blacks, perhaps a major-
ity, are firmly entrenched in the mainstream of American life; but
deep concern as to our ability to improve the disastrous situation in
poor black neighborhoods.

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Ballots, Blacks, and Bureaucrats

JEREMY RABKIN

Abigail M. Thernstrom: Whose Votes Count? Affirmative Action and

The dust-jacket blurb salutes this recent study of minority vot-
ing rights as a book raising "important questions that deserve to
be debated in public." The praise in this description is certainly
well deserved. The hope for further public debate is almost cer-
tainly unfounded, however. Thernstrom's impressively detailed and
thoughtful study does return, over and over again, to some troubling
and fundamental questions raised by the contemporary treatment of
"voting rights." But the book itself documents the extreme reluctance
of almost everyone in public life to confront these questions.

The basic outline of the story is simple—and dismayingly famil-
lar to observers of federal regulatory programs. When first enacted
in 1965, the Voting Rights Act reflected a broad national consensus
for federal action against a particular, well-defined evil. Over the
next two decades, the initial target of federal intervention was sys-
tematically eliminated and the scale and intensity of federal control
systematically extended. The current level and pattern of control
rests on a series of willful misreadings or artful evasions of caution-
ary language in the statute. The subversion of the statutory scheme
partly reflects the activist decisions of particular federal judges,
responding to well-organized litigation campaigns. Much of it also
reflects a more common pattern in federal policymaking: in prac-
tice, many policies simply reflect the will of bureaucrats in the
semi-autonomous voting-rights division of the Justice Department
—a bureaucracy which, in turn, seems to define its mission accord-
ning to the desires of its most immediate current constituency.

A program originally aimed at assuring southern black voters
unhindered access to the ballot has thus been transformed into an
"affirmative-action program," designed to maximize the "effectiv-
eness" of "minority" votes by altering the way votes are counted after
they are cast. In contrast to most other federal regulatory programs