

The increasing significance of class

Story by Darrell Hunt

In 1978, sociologist William Julius Wilson sent a shock wave through America's oldest faultline, the great racial divide. Yet, instead of focusing on the time-worn issue of the differences between Black and White Americans, Wilson's book, "The Declining Significance of Race", highlights the increasing differences between Black Americans.

Wilson states, "As the black [sic] middle class rides on the wave of political and social changes, benefiting from the growth of employment opportunities in the growing corporate and government sectors of the economy, the black [sic] underclass falls behind larger society in every conceivable respect."

Wilson's suggestion that there are actually two class-separated Black Americas continues to cause controversy in American society. Opponents of race-based remedies for past or current discrimination claim that these remedies only benefit Black Americans that already have a distinct class privilege. Black leaders are being asked to clarify for which Black

population are they speaking. Stalwart civil rights activists are frantically trying to reconnect the "two Black Americas" under one political agenda. Poor Blacks find themselves getting poorer and middle class Blacks speak of continued racial antagonism and strife. While Wilson's proposal first met with fervent criticism, many people are being won over by some very convincing statistics.

Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, in a 1994 issue of "Race and Class," report that "more than one in seven black families currently earn above \$50,000 annually." At the same time "about 12 percent of all Black families were earning less than \$5,000 annually." One-third of all Black families are below the federal government's poverty level. In their book, "America in Black and White," Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom state Black enrollment in college has increased from 1,007,000 in 1980 to 1,317,000 in 1994. They also report that only 15.3 percent of African Americans have bachelor's degrees. A national test of the reading skills of

twelfth-graders found that only 52 percent of African Americans were able to perform at a "basic," rudimentary level. "Essence" magazine (October 1997) reports that the total number of Black men and women in federal or state prison or local jail increased from 328,980 in 1985 to 766,900 in 1995.

There is a growing cadre of affluent, acculturated, highly-educated Blacks who co-exist with an ever-expanding group of Blacks who are undereducated and underemployed. The ramifications for the Black "community" have been serious. Black conservatism is growing. Black conservative "superstars," like Ward Connerly, Shelby Steele, and Thomas Sowell, are influencing national politics concerning the entire Black population. Author bell hooks ("Killing Rage") suggests that contemporary American society provides "the breeding ground for those who are privileged to internalize contempt and hatred of the black [sic] poor and underclass." With capitalism ruling the day, many Blacks are worried about their future in America.

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