

OPINION

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Economic empowerment now more important



Marc Morial
 Guest Columnist

I have said it before and I will say it again: Economic empowerment is the civil rights struggle of the 21st Century.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s helped the African-American community take great strides in terms of political and social empowerment. Doors long closed to people of color were pried open with the enactment of civil rights legislation, affirmative action and other reforms designed to give them a voice on Capitol Hill, in academia and corporate America.

But two recent studies by major thought leaders in Washington, D.C. reveal that more than 40 years later minorities in the United States still face major challenges in achieving economic parity with their white counterparts and realizing the American Dream.

The Economic Mobility Project, a research collaboration of major beltway think tanks -- The Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, Brookings Institution and Urban Institute, recently found that the income gap between black and white households has actually expanded since the early 1970s.

Black families in 2004 earned 58 percent of what White households did, down from 63 percent in 1974. This jibes well with the National Urban League's equality index, which found that Blacks had 57 percent of the economic status of Whites.

Household income, when adjusted for inflation, has actually risen as a result of more women entering the workforce. But the project's recent report, based on a survey of 2,300 families over the past 30 years, found that White households benefited most from the shift, mainly those of white women whose incomes rose 500 percent over the period while those of White men stagnated. Among Black men, income has actually fallen since 1974, offset by gains among Black women.

Comparing the incomes of parents in the late 1960s and early 1970s to those of their grown children, the report found that one in three of blacks from middle-class families earned more than their parents, compared to two-thirds of whites with comparable backgrounds.

"Overall, incomes are going up. But not all children are benefiting equally from the American dream," wrote author Julia Isaacs, a fellow at Brookings, in the report.

The roadblocks to achieving the American Dream, have

help cast a pall of pessimism over African-Americans, according to another survey by the Pew Research Center of white and black attitudes. Nearly three in 10 said they were worse off than five years ago, one in five reported that their lives had improved and only 44 percent expressed optimism about their future.

But as Chicago Urban League President Cheryl Jackson observed in a recent National Public Radio commentary, people of color have good reason to possess a less-than-cheery outlook.

"The fabric of the American Dream is made up of mobility. You don't have to be born rich or successful if you can get there by your own hard work. The belief that we can all make ourselves better unites us as Americans. But the pathway to success is increasingly obscured or non-existent for many African-Americans," she noted. "More and more one's economic future is largely decided by what zip code one is born into. Urban communities have the worst schools, the fewest jobs and lack commerce and retail."

There is a great deal of anxiety, cynicism and pessimism today, especially in urban communities. Growing rates of crime, unemployment and mortgage foreclosures are shrinking wealth, which exacerbates the dissatisfaction. And incidents such as the "Jena Six" and how they've been handled have fed into the feeling of blacks that no one will stand up to defend them.

Whites held a very different opinion of Black progress, according to the Pew Center: They were twice as likely to see gains in the past five years compared to their African-American counterparts. This finding indicates that too many Americans, Whites and even some Blacks, labor under the misconception that the playing field has indeed leveled and that the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s was enough to reverse decades of discrimination.

But the truth is that it represents one phase of an ongoing struggle for parity, especially of the pocketbook. Last July, we unveiled our Opportunity Compact: Blueprint for Economic Equality, a set of policy prescriptions to jumpstart urban American, to motivate our leaders to address economic inequities among Americans more than four decades after the first civil rights movement.

Economic empowerment means better jobs. Better jobs mean stronger communities. Stronger communities mean better schools and safer streets that attract more investment, which refuels the cycle of economic empowerment.

Marc Morial is president and CEO of the National Urban League.



HIV/AIDS STILL DEVASTATES BLACK AMERICA



George Curry
 Guest Columnist

As we prepare to commemorate World AIDS Day on Saturday, no one should overlook the devastating toll the deadly disease has taken on the African-American community. Consider the following:

- Although African-Americans represent only 12.7 percent of the U.S. population, they were half of all AIDS cases detected in 2005;

- The rate of Blacks contracting AIDS is 10 times that of Whites and Black women have contracted AIDS at a rate 23 times higher than that of White women;

- Although African-Americans constitute only 16 percent of U.S. teenagers, they represent 69 percent of all new AIDS cases reported among teens;

- Black women account for 66 percent of all new AIDS cases among women and

- HIV- and AIDS-related death rates are highest among African-Americans, with Blacks accounting for 55 percent of such deaths.

There are some interesting facts among the numbers.

Both Black and White women were most likely to be infected through heterosexual activities. White women were more likely than Black women to have been infected as a result of drug use. And among men having sex with men, one study conducted in five cities found that 46 percent of such Black men were HIV infected compared to 21 percent of White men in that category.

There were some geographical variances as well. AIDS cases were highest in the eastern section of the country, with the District of Columbia leading the way with the highest rate. However, 51 percent of Blacks living with AIDS and 56 percent of all newly-reported cases among Blacks were in the South, where African-Americans make up only 19 percent of the region's population.

Just nine states and Washington, D.C. account for 72 percent of all Blacks living with AIDS. In order, they are: New York (33,924), Florida (22,232), Texas (11,307), Georgia (11,255), Maryland



(11,113), California (10,947), New Jersey (9,511), Pennsylvania (8,488), Illinois (8,042) and the District of Columbia (7,925).

Compounding matters, according to data assembled by the Kaiser Family Foundation, "Blacks with HIV/AIDS were more likely to be publicly insured or uninsured than their white counterparts, with over half (59 percent) relying on Medicaid compared to 32 percent of whites. One fifth of Blacks with HIV/AIDS (22 percent) were uninsured compared to 17 percent of whites. Blacks were also much less likely to be privately insured than whites (14 percent compared to 44 percent)."

What can be done? On an individual level, African-Americans should eliminate risky sexual behav-

ior. And even if one contracts HIV, they can live healthier lives by being tested and treated early. Unfortunately, HIV and AIDS are detected in more advanced stages among African-Americans.

From a public policy perspective, the Open Society Institute published a report earlier this year titled, "Improving Outcomes: Blueprint for a National AIDS Plan for the United States." Chris Collins, the author of the study, observed, "It is time the United States develops what it asks of other nations that it supports in combating AIDS: a national plan that provides a roadmap for concrete and equitable results."

According to the report, such a plan should:

1) Focus increased attention on concrete outcomes through reliance on evidence-

based and cost-effective programming.

2) Set ambitious, visible and credible targets for improvement in a limited number of areas.

3) Identify clear priorities for action on the selected targets.

4) Set out specific objectives for multiple sectors, including government, civil society, community organizations, and business.

5) Make the prevention and treatment needs of African Americans a primary focus.

6) Promote and test innovative ideas about how to overcome structural barriers to more effective prevention and treatment.

7) Improve methods of measuring progress.

8) Make federal agencies responsible for coordinating the collaborative efforts of government, business, and civil society.

9) Require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to report regularly on the status of progress toward targets in the national plan.

In calling for a national plan to combat AIDS, the Open Society report does not ignore numerous panels and studies that have predated the report. Ronald Reagan's Presidential Commission on the HIV epidemic, for example, issued 600 recommendations, most of them ignored. The Clinton administration issued its own National AIDS Strategy report in 1997. Most of its proposals were similarly ignored.

"Over 1.5 million infections and over a half million deaths into its 26-year-old HIV/AIDS epidemic, the United States still does not have a comprehensive strategic national plan to tackle AIDS within its own borders," the Open Society report states. "The United States will spend over \$16 billion on the domestic epidemic in fiscal year 2007...But no comprehensive plan will guide strategic use of AIDS-related dollars or hold government agencies accountable for steadily improved outcomes for people living with HIV/AIDS or at risk of infection."

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of *Emerge* magazine and the NNPA News Service, is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. He can be reached through his Web site, www.georgecurry.com.