

## The Racial Injustice of Poverty

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*The following essay is based on a presentation given by Professor Mark R. Rank on 10 March 1999 as a part of an interdisciplinary panel discussion of Professor Dorothy Roberts' paper.*

I would like to briefly comment and expand upon a major point that Professor Dorothy Roberts has made, both in her talk today and in her writing. She has noted that black children are disproportionately taken from the custody of their parents and placed into foster care largely as a result of poverty.<sup>1</sup> The argument is that poverty, which disproportionately affects black families, creates an environment that can often lead to parental neglect and child abuse. Therefore, black children are disproportionately placed into foster care as a result. Ultimately, Professor Roberts' conclusion is that we should be attacking poverty to improve the well-being of children. Professor Roberts writes, "To be just, children's rights must be a part of a broader struggle to eradicate oppressive structures that imprison children and to create a more egalitarian society that cherishes all children."<sup>2</sup>

In order to shed more light on this, I would like to briefly discuss some of the research on which I am currently working that looks at the issues of poverty and race in a different fashion. My recent work attempts to paint a much broader view of poverty by looking at

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1. See Dorothy Roberts, *Poverty, Race, and New Directions in Child Welfare Policy*, 1 WASH. U. J.L. & POL'Y 63 (1999).

2. Dorothy Roberts, *Is There Justice in Children's Rights?: The Critique of Federal Family Preservation Policy*, paper presented at the University of Pennsylvania (1999).

childhood and adulthood as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Rather than asking what the rate of poverty is at a single point in time in a child's or adult's life, the question I am analyzing is: What is the likelihood of poverty across the entire span of the childhood and adulthood years?

To answer this question I am using a longitudinal data set that annually tracks a very large number of individuals and households in the United States from 1968 to the present. This ("PSID") data set is known as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.<sup>4</sup> From the PSID I have constructed a series of life tables that calculate the probabilities of American children between the ages of one and seventeen and American adults across the ages of twenty to seventy-five of ever experiencing poverty.

I would like to mention a few of the findings that deal with the question of how racial differences affect the likelihood of poverty. By the age of six, fifty-seven percent of black children will experience at least one year of life below the poverty line as compared with fifteen percent for white children. By age twelve the percentages rise to sixty-seven percent for black children versus twenty-one percent for white children, and by age seventeen, sixty-nine percent of black children versus twenty-six percent of white children will experience at least one year of life below the poverty line. For some black children the figures are even more startling. For example, ninety-two percent of black children in a single-parent household where the parent holds less than twelve years of education experienced at least one year of poverty by age six. By age twelve the figure is ninety-eight percent of black children. In other words, virtually every black child with these characteristics experience at least one year of poverty early in their lives.

What about adults? Using the same type of approach, from age twenty through age seventy-five, we can ask: what is the likelihood of Americans experiencing poverty during adulthood? By age thirty, fifty-six percent of black Americans have experienced poverty at some

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3. See Mark R. Rank & Thomas A. Hirshl, *The Likelihood of Poverty Across the American Adult Life Span*, 44 *SOCIAL WORK* 201-16 (1999).

4. See MARTHA S. HILL, *THE PANEL STUDY OF INCOME DYNAMICS: A USER'S GUIDE* (1992).

point during their adult lives, sixty-six percent by age forty, seventy-six percent by age fifty, and ninety-one percent by the age of seventy-five. In comparison, fifty-three percent of white Americans will experience poverty at some point during their adult lives, which is also an exceedingly high figure. When compared, though, these differences are startling.

The final thing I will mention is that we have also examined the likelihood of experiencing poverty versus the likelihood of affluence across the adult lifespan. Affluence in this analysis is defined as nine times the poverty level.<sup>5</sup> In 1997, the poverty line for a family of four was \$16,400.<sup>6</sup> Affluence would therefore be \$147,600 or above for that same family. Our findings indicate that for all Americans the risk of poverty versus the likelihood of affluence across the life course is about one-to-one. The likelihood of being poor and the likelihood of achieving affluence is about the same. However, for twenty-five year old black Americans the risk of poverty in two years exceeds their chance of ever experiencing affluence across a fifty-one year span, from the ages of twenty-five to seventy-five. In other words, the odds of black Americans experiencing affluence versus poverty are approximately one to twenty-five versus the one to one odds of all Americans.

In conclusion, I think the thrust of these results will lead us back to W.E.B. DuBois's classical formulation of the organic interrelation of race and class dynamics in American society.<sup>7</sup> The fact that virtually every African-American will experience poverty at some point during their adulthood and that very few will experience affluence speaks volumes about the economic meaning of being black in America. Likewise, the fact that a majority of black children will face poverty early in life speaks volumes as to one of the basic injustices that

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5. The choice of 9 as a multiplier, versus 8, 10, or some other number is of course arbitrary. However, this approach and multiplier has been used in other economic analyses to define the rich, and in fact appears to be a reasonable proxy for what many Americans consider affluent. See Sheldon Danziger et al., *How the Rich Have Fared, 1973-87*, 79 AM. ECON. REV. 310-14 (1989).

6. U.S. Census Bureau, *Poverty in the United States: 1997* (1998).

7. W. E. B. DuBois, *BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA: AN ESSAY TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE PART WHICH BLACK FOLK PLAYED IN THE ATTEMPT TO RECONSTRUCT DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, 1860-1880* (1935).

Dorothy Roberts points out regarding poverty, race, and child welfare policy.