

By Orlando Patterson and Chris Winship

That racism remains a horrible blight on this society has been made painfully clear by the sadistic police gang beating of Rodney King, the mindless insensitivities of Daryl Gates and the shamelessly immoral verdict that has ignited rage in the nation's second city. That a significant minority of African Americans face a chronic economic crisis, with 40 percent of their children in poverty, is a national tragedy. And that a much smaller proportion — perhaps no more than 10 percent — is trapped in a life style of criminality and self-destruction, we all know and dread.

Though historically linked, these three problems have evolved as different social cancers that, while disproportionately harming the African American part of the nation, increasingly threaten its entire body politic. Combining them confuses the issues, worsens racial divisions and thwarts sound policy.

The best analysts on the subject, the sociologists Christopher Jencks and William J. Wilson, have shown that while the pathologies of the underclass are a menace to itself and to other Americans, especially the working poor, it constitutes a small, declining fraction of the black population. What's more, the immediate causes of anarchic behavior are hardly racist; the symptoms of moral and social chaos increasingly apply to the less visible, predominantly rural and suburban white underclass.

We hear next to nothing about this group, although it is greater in absolute numbers, because of its great inaccessibility, the less observable nature of its vices (such as wife battering, incest and alcoholism) and the media's pandering to their audience's presumed conviction that only blacks behave pathologically.

The problem of the black working poor is simple, and it is identical to that of the growing white poor: they do not earn enough and their low wages are declining as a result of structural economic changes and the heartless policies of the 80's that substantially widened income inequality. African Americans have been disproportionately hurt by these changes and as a result the racial differentiation in income has grown. It is a distortion, however, to neglect the convergence of this group with the white poor.

By dividing the poor along racial lines and making poverty a black problem, we obscure the growing chasm between rich and poor in this

Orlando Patterson, professor of sociology at Harvard, is author of "Freedom in the Making of Western Culture." Chris Winship is professor of sociology, statistics and economics at Northwestern University.

country by further identifying the black poor with the underclass, we reinforce the myth that poverty is a moral problem that only the poor themselves (or, falling short, a long prison term) can solve.

Nothing plagues analyses of the African American population more than the misuse of averages and the tendency to regard all 30 million as a single, monolithic group. Andrew Hacker's recent book, "Two Nations," is typical.

In stark contrast with many statistics he later presents, Mr. Hacker patronizingly imagines a late-20th-century prototypical black who wanders on the margins of the white world, overwhelmed by his black

Theories that set all of us back.

ness, a slug on the salt of America's obsessive whiteness. "Separate, hostile and unequal," brutalized, victimized, the black passes his joyless existence without hope, secretly cursing his genetic destiny for placing him in "so disconsolate an estate."

This insulting travesty tells us a great deal about ultra-liberal thought on the subject, and why it has failed so dismally to come up with a viable response to conservative divisiveness, moral posturing and neglect. Some blacks, like numerous whites, may feel marginalized; most do not.

Blacks fail the so-called telephone test mentioned by Mr. Hacker (you can tell it's one of them, even on the phone), not because they can't talk "white," like the invidiously compared Asians, but because they enjoy talking "black." Much racial tension in recent years has had to do with African Americans' unwillingness to be "white" — as the price of greater equality and opportunity. They live separately from whites for radically different reasons, most because they choose to. This, in itself, is no problem; it's a free country.

Equally patronizing and confusing is the growing tendency to conceive of whites in monolithic terms, as a chronically racist majority that is hostile to black advancement and benefits from oppression of blacks. In the U.S., unlike South Africa, whites outnumber blacks by 9 to 1. This means that the racist behavior of a small proportion of whites, or a small amount of discrimination by a majority, can result in significant harm to blacks.

This is the permanently bad news about minority status, as any Jew or Northern Irish Catholic will attest. For a few whites, the economic and psychological gains from oppressing blacks may be considerable. For the vast majority, however, there is nothing to be gained; it is hard to see how

any group gains from the drug abuse violence, irresponsible parenting and AIDS epidemic of the underclass. Racial problems remain intractable because it is just as important to get the majority of whites to stop discriminating in the little ways that they do as it is to get the outright racist few to stop discriminating a lot.

Lumping the two groups together along with genuinely unprejudiced whites, is as misleading as identifying all blacks with the underclass. Nor should we underestimate the degree to which the vestigially prejudiced majority may be changing and may genuinely want a culturally and racially diverse society, as repeated opinion polls indicate. Reinforcing the poll data on changing white attitudes is a growing body of cultural evidence: the enormous popularity of "The Cosby Show," the hero worship of a large number of African American athletes and entertainers, the idolization of Anita Hill, the celebration and deep respect for artistic giants like Toni Morrison, Miles Davis and Alvin Ailey.

Indeed, not since ancient Rome conquered and then surrendered to the culture of its Greek slaves and freedmen has the culture of a dominant world civilization been so enormously influenced by so small a minority of people. It is elitist and obtuse to discount the significance of this influence on white attitudes; it is egregious to suggest, as Mr. Hacker does, that love for a Michael Jordan is mere gladiatorial dehumanization.

Insisting that whites are responsible for black problems leads to a stalemate, for it only alleges the majority of whites, themselves barely coping, who may be only marginally racist or not racist at all. Worse is the failure to separate the question of blame from what is required to change the situation.

Even if it were true that whites are to be blamed for the problems disproportionately faced by blacks, it is disastrous strategy to insist that whites are responsible, qua whites, for solving their problems. However disquieting to moralists, majorities everywhere are moved to solve fundamental problems only when they find it in their interest to do so.

The Civil War was fought to abolish slavery, not primarily in response to the moral exhortation of abolitionists, but mainly because Northern whites became convinced that slavery threatened their individual, and the national, interests. The same holds even more in these selfish times.

The trials of the growing ranks of the poor, the anarchy of the underclass — visible and invisible, black and white — threaten us all, as does the perversion of justice by racist jurors. We must solve these problems together by insisting that analysts and the media report on them unsensationally and unpatronizingly. And we must demand that our frivolously distracted leaders, black and white, stop playing self-serving games of racial blame, denial and division, and address this national tragedy at once.

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No Innocents Here