

Reading 13: Affirmative Action Has Worked

Few government programs to help blacks overcome the damage of racism have caused as much controversy as affirmative action. Begun by President John F. Kennedy and expanded by subsequent Democratic and Republican administrations, affirmative action is a catchall for government efforts to give preference to blacks (and other minorities) to overcome the disadvantages caused by past discrimination. While affirmative action raises many legal and philosophical questions yet to be resolved, numerous experts have concluded that the dramatic rise in the size of the black middle class which have occurred since the 1960s is directly traceable to federal government programs, particularly affirmative action.

A Buzzword Defined

"Affirmative action" began when the Kennedy administration ordered companies doing business with the government to root out discrimination in their ranks. Now the phrase refers to a wide range of steps taken by colleges, corporations and government agencies to help minorities and women.

Recruiting: Aggressive outreach is the least controversial form of affirmative action. Many employers advertise job openings in African-American newspapers and interview at women's colleges.

Goals and Timetables: The Labor Department requires firms receiving federal contracts to establish hiring goals for women and minorities—and deadlines for getting there. Many universities set up similar targets for admissions and faculty hires.

Quotas: Goals sometimes lapse into rigid quotas in which employers or admissions directors must hit a specific number of minority hires or students.

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THE GREENING OF AMERICA'S BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

Whether or not judges and legislators limit affirmative action, its promise is being fulfilled for many blacks who have made striking gains in income and employment in the 30 years since the Government began guaranteeing equal rights to jobs and education.

Just how much those gains can be attributed to affirmative action preferences and other Government remedies is arguable. But over those three decades, a tiny middle class typified by doctors, teachers and small entrepreneurs working often within the boundaries of the black community evolved into a larger, more diverse group that has been charted by economists, courted by politicians and validated by prime-time sitcoms on television, which belatedly discovered a vast consumer market. It also appears that the boats of the middle class rose on the high tide of the 1980's.

Gains have occurred in higher education, careers and income. The number of black lawyers, doctors and engineers has risen sharply; the earnings of a growing contingent of government workers, pharmacists, mathematicians, designers, engineers and others approaches or even surpasses that of comparable whites, and this group now accounts for a higher proportion of blacks in their chosen professions than their proportion in the general population.

For young, college-educated two-earner married couples, income differentials between blacks and whites are negligible. According to an analysis of the 1990 Census for The New York Times, almost as many black workers between the ages of 25 and 44 are college graduates as are high school dropouts. Just 20 years ago, there were five times as many black high school dropouts as college graduates in the work force.

"It's the result of breaking down barriers in education and jobs, and affirmative action could have helped overcome some of them, especially for education," said Dr. Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociologist at Queens College who conducted the census analysis for The Times.

Last week, the Supreme Court cast doubt on the constitutionality of Federal programs that award benefits on the basis of race. The Colorado case, *Adarand Constructors v. Peña*, involved a requirement that 10 percent of Federal money spent on highway projects go to businesses owned by "disadvantaged individuals." The case was returned to Federal District Court where a formidable new standard set by the Supreme Court will now be applied: whether "narrowly tailored" programs accomplish a "compelling governmental interest."

If the judicial decision seems abstract, the gains by many blacks since the Government began aggressively enforcing civil rights laws and imposing remedies for past discrimination have been concrete.

During the same period, however, the proportion of poorest blacks has also grown and the income of many whites, adjusted for inflation, has stalled or shrunk. And blacks, overall, still lag far behind whites in income—earning about \$63 for every \$100 a white household earns—and they lag even farther behind in accumulated wealth. Even among the younger, better-educated group, in which experience ought to be less of a variable, they work longer hours but still make less money than whites do.

Segregated housing and other barriers to mobility persist, ranging from glass ceilings that keep blacks from top executive positions to recurring insults and assumptions based on stereotypes.

Membership in the middle class may be as much a state of mind as of economic realities. Economists say a middle-class household can earn anywhere from \$20,000 and \$60,000 a year, depending on how many mouths there are to feed, local living costs and savings.

Just a generation ago, only 1 in 17 black families even made the contemporary equivalent of \$50,000 or more. By 1989, 1 in 7 did (compared to 1 in 3 white families). From 1967 to 1989, that category expanded from 266,000 black families to more than a million (doubling in the 1980's). In that group, 1 person in 3 was a college graduate, 2 in 3 were between the ages of 35 and 55 and nearly 8 in 10 were married.

In Queens, New York City's storied middle-class borough, the income of black households actually surpassed that of whites during the 1980's. The growth came from two- and three-earner families (headed by couples) working longer hours than their white counterparts. Only 1 in 50 blacks makes more than \$50,000 a year without the help of another family member.

Queens is one of about a dozen racially integrated places with a population of 50,000 or more where the income of black households nearly equals or surpasses that of whites. Common threads bind their black populations: a majority are married, between one-third and two-thirds have completed college and women make up about half the labor force.

The Times's census analysis found that among blacks between the ages of 25 and 44, 1 in 10 classified themselves as professionals in 1970 compared to nearly 1 in 6 by 1990. That represented an increase from about 400,000 to nearly 1.3 million. Among all young professionals, 1 in 20 was black in 1970; by 1990, 1 in 12 was.

Would the gains among blacks have been as great if the Government had not overturned Jim Crow laws and barred discriminatory practices, beginning with the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling that segregated schools were inherently unequal, and continuing with the civil rights revolution of the 1960's? Undoubtedly not. Subsequent affirmative action and other preferential programs probably helped blacks as well. Yet those programs left legions of blacks behind and also benefited many blacks who were already upwardly mobile.

The surge in the number of better-off blacks can also be attributed to the boom in the mid-1980's. But a report for the Population Reference Bureau, a nonpartisan research group, suggests that the market, and those who manage it, needed prodding. "Black children of the civil rights era were the first generation to benefit fully from the expansion in education and equal opportunity law," the report concludes. "Young blacks who were in school in the 1960's reached their 30's and 40's in the 1980's, the ages at which increased educational attainment begins to pay off financially."

So far, the renewed debate over programs intended to remedy racism's ills and guarantee equal opportunity revolve mostly around who may get hurt, not helped. But ultimately, Government policy often is shaped when conscience is coupled with self-interest. For all Americans, the payoff from a growing black middle class is only beginning.

—By Sam Roberts

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