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Unemployment Issues Go Beyond Race

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

Two letters Nov. 12 criticize an Oct. 29 article and comments by me about Timothy Smeeding's study comparing anti-poverty efforts in the United States, Western Europe and Canada. Roger Wilkins complains about the failure to recognize the special American problem, race, and Sheila Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn disagree with my assertion that social spending in the United States cannot be one-dimensionally compared to that in the prosperous and largely segregated countries of Western Europe.

The contradictory nature of the two letters, I think, demonstrates the dangers of cross-cultural comparisons.

Unlike Western European countries, we have large numbers of teen-agers who have babies out of wedlock and then go on welfare. According to the Congressional Budget Office, 77 percent of all unwed teen-age mothers go on welfare within five years of their first child's birth—and many stay there for 10 years or more.

Few analysts question that welfare payments act as a work disincentive, particularly for young people without work experience; they just argue about its size. In a study for the University of Wisconsin Institute on Poverty, Robert Moffitt estimates that every dollar transferred to female-headed households reduces the mother's work effort by 37 cents.

Of greater concern to me, however, are Professor Wilkins's comments about nonwork being a code word for race. If you don't work, you are likely to be poor (unless you are the child of a millionaire). About half of all the poor do not work at all.

Mr. Wilkins seems to assume that it is blacks and other racial minorities who are not working. In making this assumption, he himself falls victim to racial stereotyping.

Actually, the overall labor force participation rates of whites and blacks are roughly equal. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the rates for white and black 25- to 64-year-olds are about 79 percent and 75 percent, respectively. African-Americans with at least a high school education have higher levels of participation than their white counterparts. Overall black rates are slightly lower than for whites only because blacks tend to have less schooling.

The failure to graduate from high school is now the most important predictor of nonwork among

all groups except white female dropouts. Rates for them have risen to those of black female dropouts because they are now substantially less likely to marry. Among male high school dropouts of both races, labor force rates fell by almost 20 percent.

Only among male high school dropouts is the black rate lower than the white (for those 16 and older, about 47 percent to 56 percent). This difference shows the distressing plight of many young, black males. Their condition seems the indisputable result of discrimination—and attention is required.

These data, however, show a broader—and deeper—trend of declining labor force participation among poorly educated men of all races. Are our schools failing the disadvantaged? Or are deeper social processes at work, fed by higher levels of social permissiveness and social welfare incentives against work? My own guess is that it is a mixture of the three.

If we don't confront the issues of nonwork, we will never be able to do anything about the resulting poverty. Probably without intending it, Professor Wilkins has lent his considerable prestige to the quite dangerous suggestion that talking about nonwork is racist.

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