THE CHANGING ECONOMIC POSITION OF BLACK URBAN WORKERS

By
Jack E. Nelson

Data from the 1970 Census indicate clearly that a major restructuring of residence patterns along racial lines is taking place in the nation. Whites are moving to suburban areas and Blacks are concentrating in the nation's inner cities. Blacks have made significant economic gains by inheriting a piece of the nation's cities, but if current trends continue, the economic growth potential of these areas from a long range perspective is questionable. As the opportunities gained from the out migration of white workers taper off and as natural economic growth in inner cities continues to wane, unless action is taken to the contrary, the dramatic gains in employment evidenced by black workers in the sixties will trail off severely. This likely possibility will occur despite the fact that the black work force is presently better qualified to compete for jobs with whites than at any other point in the nation's history. This paper attempts to shed some light on these important issues in the hope that it will help to spur the national debate — particularly in the black community — over strategies to continue the advancement of black Americans.
In the turbulent years between 1960 and 1970, 2.6 million whites left the nation’s inner cities (Table 1)*. Most of the exodus consisted of adults between the ages of 25 and 44 years, and children under 14 years. The movement among whites, from both urban and rural areas, was primarily to suburban areas. By 1970 the white suburban population had increased 32 percent over 1960, and nearly 4 in 10 whites lived there. As whites migrated to suburban areas, the black population in inner cities increased by 3.1 million. In percentage terms, 70 percent of the growth of the black population took place in the nation’s inner cities. By 1970, 55 percent of all Blacks lived in urban centers and constituted 22 percent of the total inner city population — up from 16 percent in 1960. The black population in several major cities — such as Atlanta, Washington, Gary and Newark — approached or topped the 50 percent mark.

The cross-migratory pattern of whites to suburban areas and Blacks to central cities is the greatest single factor contributing to the general improvement in employment opportunities for Negro workers in the decade of the sixties. There were a total of 1,153,000 jobs held by white males in inner cities in 1959 that were not held by them in 1969 (Table 2. Increases primarily in the professional and technical, and managerial occupations reduced the net loss of jobs by white males to 900,000, but, overall, the gross number of jobs vacated by them in central cities totaled 1,153,000.

The vacuum created by the large exodus of white males from inner city labor forces resulted in greater employment opportunities for minority workers. Jobs held by Blacks in inner cities increased by a phenomenal 1.2 million between 1960 and 1970 — an increase greater than the total net growth of 1.1 million jobs for all races in the inner city. Blacks on the other hand obtained only 4.2 percent of the increase in jobs in suburban and 3.9 percent in rural areas. A preponderate 70 percent of the total increase in jobs in the black work force occurred in the nation’s central cities.

*The terms inner city, central city, city and urban are used interchangeably. They refer to the corporate limits of the core cities of Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA’s). Suburban areas are defined as areas within SMSA’s but outside of the core cities of the SMSA’s. Rural is defined as areas outside of SMSA’s.