

## **“BRINGING GAUTREAUX TO SCALE – AND DEGHETTOIZING AMERICA”**

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MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION:

I'm going to begin with Jason DeParle of the *New York Times* who writes in a powerful metaphorical way about the effect urban poverty has on race relations in America. The effect, DeParle says, is that of a poison in our national groundwater that is producing a thousand deformed fruits.

Pushing beyond the metaphor, let's ask what DeParle is really saying. What exactly is the effect of urban poverty on race relations? How is the effect poisonous? What are these deformed fruits?

I put it to the Commission that urban poverty mixed with American race relations has produced this toxic thing we call the ghetto. (I know the Commission understands that in using that term I do not refer to voluntary ethnic

enclaves but to the involuntary geographic confinement of blacks and other groups, typically in areas of concentrated poverty.) I call the ghetto toxic for well-known reasons.

Forty-five years ago, on the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, James Baldwin said it plain – the black ghetto had destroyed and was continuing to destroy hundreds of thousands of lives.

Two years later, in *Dark Ghetto*, wielding words like a surgeon's scalpel, Kenneth Clark unforgettably described the particulars of the destruction. Twenty-two years later, in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson did it again.

But the ghetto is worse now than it was when Wilson wrote. *Truly Disadvantaged* appeared after many inner-city jobs had already moved to the suburbs and overseas. It appeared, however, before the full effects of crack-cocaine's recent arrival had become apparent. With the maturation of the War on Drugs, targeted on inner-city minorities, and mass incarceration rather than treatment as our policy of choice, our black ghettos are not only bigger than they were when Baldwin, Clark, and Wilson wrote, they are also more efficient engines of human destruction.

Now I want to tell the Commission that bad as it may be for the State to be destroying the lives of hundreds of thousands of its ghetto-confined citizens,

there is more. There is the slower acting but equally deadly effect of groundwater poisoning that is the “vicious circle” Gunnar Myrdal described long ago: “White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living, health, education, manners and morals. This, in its turn, gives support to white prejudice.”

Forty years after Myrdal wrote those words, Elijah Anderson, in his well-known study of a black ghetto and an adjacent gentrifying neighborhood, observed that Myrdal’s vicious circle was alive and well. White skin, he found, denoted civility, law-abidingness, and trustworthiness. Black skin was strongly associated with poverty, crime, incivility, and distrust. John Yinger, George Galster, and Glenn Loury have all made like observations. It’s not rocket science. Ghettoization leads to ghetto behavior that, widely reported by the media, is seen by whites as validating and legitimizing their prejudicial attitudes.

With what consequences? The answer is in the Commission’s briefing book. An article you’ll find there, adapted from my book, *Waiting for Gautreaux*, explains how ghettoization led to the break-up of the coalition that birthed the New Deal, and how it has led us to pursue a ghetto-targeted mass incarceration policy that is both mindless and destructive of traditional American values.

Can these deformed fruits -- there are of course many more -- be blamed solely on black ghettos? No, they cannot. Ending black ghettos wouldn’t end

anti-black prejudice any more than ending Jewish ghettos ended anti-semitism. Yet few things in American society match the black ghetto for its poisoning effect on attitudes, values, and conduct. Disaster may not come in the form of riots and race wars. But it will be no less a disaster for the America we love if American values are sufficiently deformed.

So what, at long last, should we do about it? Here too the answer is in your briefing book. You heard from Jim Rosenbaum in Chicago about the stunning results of the Gautreaux Program. You have heard today from Zav Briggs, Barbara Sard, and Cynthia Watts-Elder about what can be done to make housing mobility a reality. Collectively, these four witnesses are saying something that it is crucial for Americans to hear. And this Commission should be the truth-teller.

It *is* possible to give our black and Hispanic ghetto-dwellers a way out of hopelessness and despair. It *is* possible to deghettoize America. And it *is* possible to end the vicious cycle that is poisoning our national groundwater and deforming our country.

A plan to do just that is laid out in *Waiting for Gautreaux* and summarized in your briefing book. Based on what Rosenbaum, and now Briggs, and Sard and Watts-Elder, have told you, the plan in concept is simple. It takes what we already know how to do – effective pre- and post-move mobility counseling – and

says, look, just offer this to the residents of our ghettos. Congress need only authorize a mobility voucher program to be run in parallel with the “regular” voucher program (improved, however, as Barbara Sard and the others have explained) but under its own mobility rules. Do it at reasonable scale and over a reasonable time – in my book I’ve suggested 50,000 vouchers per year over ten years. But let’s begin. Do it!

It will not dismantle our ghettos overnight. And it will not be easy – scaling up never is. But it is doable. And at long last we will have begun to deal with the cancer – the modern successor to slavery and Jim Crow -- that has been lodged in the body politic ever since that day in 1637 when the first American slave ship sailed out of Marblehead. In a reasonable time, compared to the more than 370 years of our illness, we will be on the road to recovery.

I have considered all of the responsible objections, and some not so responsible. None in my opinion are persuasive. And the cost would be miniscule. If we simply allocated half our turnover vouchers to the parallel mobility program, we wouldn’t even have to issue new vouchers. There is no good reason to wait any longer to bring Gautreaux to scale except lack of political will.

DeTocqueville prophesied that the American race problem would be insoluble and would eventuate in disaster. Historian George Fredrickson

advances the slightly more hopeful view that the problem could be solved by a radical change in basic institutions and values – “perhaps because the social anxieties fueling prejudiced thought and action have been removed.” If that is possible, Fredrickson continues, then it is the responsibility of Americans who believe in the ideal of racial equality to indulge in some serious Utopian thinking, for “there is always the slender but precious hope that today’s Utopia can be tomorrow’s society.”

I put it to the members of this Commission that they should in their report indulge in some serious Utopian thinking about America’s ghettos. And about the housing mobility program that can end them.

Thank you.