

## **When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor**

**William Julius Wilson  
Random House Publishing, 1997**

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### **Brief Summary**

*When Work Disappears* provides an in-depth inquiry into the causes of poverty and joblessness in urban areas. Wilson focuses on the structural and cultural constraints in inner cities as the major factors for urban poverty.

### **Facts and Findings**

The book focuses on why there is poverty in the inner city of Chicago, while also drawing figures and examples from similarly situated cities across America. Wilson examines the roles of structural constraints, cultural constraints, and race in causing poverty and joblessness.

Structural changes in society have had a large impact on low-skilled workers. For example, job ladders within firms have been eroded, leaving many low-skilled workers in dead-end, low-paying jobs. Thus, the chances of improving one's earnings have declined. Another major factor is the loss of manufacturing jobs, which has caused low-skilled workers to seek jobs in low paying service sector jobs. Increasingly, manufacturing jobs have been transferred abroad. In a twenty-year period from 1967 to 1987, Philadelphia lost 64 percent of its manufacturing; Chicago lost 60 percent; New York City lost 58 percent; and Detroit lost 51 percent.

There is a correlation between education and/or training, and wages and employment. In the new global economy, there is an increased demand for employees trained in computer-based technologies (29). This demand displaces many of the traditional low-skilled workers. Most newly created jobs require a college degree or at least some college education, leaving many urban poor unable to compete for these positions.

Another structural change is suburbanization. Over a two-decade period, 60 percent of new jobs created in the Chicago metropolitan area

were located in the suburbs. People living in the inner city must consider transportation, commuting time and travel expenses when looking for a job in the suburbs. Most inner-city workers have inadequate transportation to get to suburban jobs (39).

Wilson's argument about cultural constraints focuses on the low level of social organization, but high level of joblessness and poverty, in unstable inner city neighborhoods. Social organization, as defined by Wilson, is "the extent to which the residents of a neighborhood are able to maintain effective social control and realize their common goals."(20)

In neighborhoods with high levels of joblessness and poverty, there is a low level of social organization. These neighborhoods are prone to higher levels of family breakups, crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking. Often, teenagers, who are willing to work more cheaply than adults in this sector of the informal economy, are the ones selling drugs.

The presence of high levels of drug activity in a neighborhood correlate with high levels of joblessness and poverty (59). When there are drugs and violence in the neighborhood, there is less community involvement, which leads to lower levels of social organization. Generally, adolescents benefit directly from the exchange of resources produced by their parents' social integration with others in the neighborhood (62). When there is a lack of social integration, adolescents do not benefit from the resources, leading to the risk that the adolescents will not become productive citizens and will fall into poverty like their parents.

In these same neighborhoods, there are few employment opportunities, inadequate job information networks, and poor schools, which are all factors in jobs leaving the inner city. When there is no work for the adults, young people may grow up in an environment where work is not a central experience of adult life.

When there is absence of regular employment, a person lacks a place in which to work and the receipt of regular income, but also a coherent system of concrete expectations and goals (73). Elements of culture are situationally adaptive—providing people with models of behavior that apply to situations specific to that community. When most members of a community are not working on a regular basis, it is seen as acceptable.

Lack of work leads to absence of work-related behavior such as punctuality, responsibility, proper English, and even dress codes. Not adopting proper work-related behavior leads to an increased chance of not finding a job that pays enough to live, or of not finding a job at all. Thus,

the neighborhood culture that is created in areas of high poverty and joblessness becomes a perpetuating factor of poverty and joblessness.

The racial demographics of cities are also changing. Seven out of eight people residing in ghettos in metropolitan areas in 1990 were minority group members (51). Many employers in Wilson's study of the Chicago area considered inner-city workers, especially black males, to be uneducated, unstable, uncooperative and dishonest (111). Many employers believed that due to a lack of family work history or the social environment of the inner city, inner-city minorities were less prepared to work (115).

Few employers admitted to racial prejudice as a reason for not hiring minorities from the inner city. But the evidence showed that there was a widespread form of statistical discrimination – drawing conclusions about an applicant's productivity based on racial stereotypes (129). The widely shared perception that inner-city blacks have bad attitudes, along with erratic work histories in high-turnover jobs, makes these workers undesirable.

Interestingly, both white and black hiring employers had a similar view of inner-city applicants (130). Seventy-four percent of all white employers interviewed responded by expressing negative views of inner-city black applicants. Eighty percent of the black employers expressed the same negative views of inner-city black applicants.

The “new urban poverty,” as defined by Wilson, is segregated neighborhoods in which a substantial majority of individual adults are either unemployed or have dropped out of the labor force altogether (19). In Wilson's view, a combination of structural and cultural problems and racial discrimination are the causes of this new urban poverty.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

There is a need for employees who have education and training that is beyond the reach of most minorities in the inner cities of the United States (151). More education is needed because of the growing gap between the skilled and unskilled workers. Large numbers of unskilled workers are out of work or poorly paid, as opposed to educated workers who are benefiting from technological change (152).

Companies can better compete in the global economy by improving productivity and quality or by reducing workers' income. It is more common for companies to lower workers' income (152). The compensation for the typical U.S. worker in manufacturing has remained flat or declined since the mid-1970s. In the 1980's, wages for low-income

workers who lacked a college education dropped fifteen percent in the U.S. (154).

The media also has a role in decreasing the job opportunities of inner-city workers. In August of 1977 *Time* magazine ran an article titled “The American Underclass: Minority Within a Minority.” This article, and others like it, have created a stigma for the urban poor -- that they are an “underclass” that is more than undesirable as employees (174).

Wilson argues for race neutral programs to help solve the problems faced by inner-city workers. These programs would increase employment opportunities and job training, improve public education, promote better child and health care, and reduce neighborhood crime and drug abuse (205). However, there would be a disproportionate benefit to the most disadvantaged segments of the population, especially poor minorities. Wilson also advocates for more flexible criteria of evaluation for hiring and job promotion, based on a broad definition of “disadvantaged” that encompasses both need and race.

Wilson suggests a long-term solution to generate better jobs and stop the growing wage inequality among workers is to create a close relationship between education (focusing on education on a national level; (212) and employment and family support systems. Current programs should be revised or new programs created to decrease the joblessness among disadvantaged adults (208).

Research indicates that cities and suburbs are economically interdependent (219). Therefore, another approach is to promote city and suburban cooperation (219). This cooperation will benefit not just the inner city, but the area as a whole. Improvement to the public transportation system is the first step in this cooperation, which will help prevent high joblessness in the inner city.

Lastly, a short-term solution is a Works Progress Administration (“WPA”) approach, which would create jobs for displaced workers willing to take lower-paying, public-sector jobs until they find higher-paying work in the private sector (231). The WPA-style jobs would not be similar to welfare, because, unlike welfare, they would be available to everybody (230). The primary goal would be to increase the number of jobs.

The WPA approach would promote social and economic improvements that would benefit all groups in society, not just the disadvantaged segments of the population (232). Additionally, the program should only produce goods and services that are not being produced in the private sector and not already provided by regular, public-sector workers (233).

If these policies were adopted, it would alleviate a large amount of economic and social distress and joblessness. The inner-city employment base would increase, and the income levels would rise (238). A better employment base in the inner city would improve the social organization of poverty stricken neighborhoods. This would, in turn, reduce the crime and drug abuse. The attitudes of employers toward inner-city workers would change because the workers would have gained a steady work background (238).

### **Analysis / Critique**

Overall, Wilson's book is interesting and insightful. The facts and figures were persuasive when coupled with the discussion of the cultural, structural, and racial aspects of poverty and joblessness. Particularly useful are the long-term and short-term solutions that Wilson proposes. The last section of the book is well written and uses the foundation of facts from the first section to illustrate what solutions can be implemented to help stop poverty and joblessness.

Additionally, Wilson consistently included findings from other studies conducted, and was able to compare his findings to others. Most of his findings were consistent to other findings, and Wilson was then able to further develop all of the information succinctly, and form a conclusion. Discussing differing opinions was throughout the book, as well as concurring with other opinions. This mix made for a well developed, thought out book.

However, throughout the book Wilson states a fact or figure for the United States as a whole and then concludes that Chicago must be like the rest of the United States. I found this analytical leap unpersuasive. Since the focus of the book was Chicago, Wilson should have used statistics from Chicago to draw conclusions from.

Wilson calls for a lot of government action and policy reforms and leaves out what individuals can do to help stop inner-city poverty. However, inferences can be drawn from Wilson's arguments. Greater community involvement is something that everybody can do, regardless of government action. Similarly, employers can adopt race-neutral hiring practices and avoid stereotypical views of minorities from the inner city.

Volunteering more in the community and telling our legislatures what is expected of them in stopping poverty and joblessness are both steps that everybody can take to do their part in helping the new urban poor.

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