

# Why the war on poverty failed — and what to do now

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Last summer, Black Lives Matter presented an extensive platform of remedies for the crisis in black America. A time traveler from 1964, if given a printed-out copy of this platform, could have mistaken it as an archival document from the Johnson administration's "war on poverty" — that is, jobs programs, educational reform, mental health services, and the like. The BLM thinkers surely know that such a war had already existed, but consider it to have been a failure.

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Yet at the time, it seemed that a Hillary Clinton administration would have a certain interest in attending to BLM's concerns and black America's entrenched problems. Donald Trump, however, is the president-elect. His interest in "the African Americans" seems parenthetical at best, and his appointment of Ben Carson to lead the Department of Housing and Urban Development suggests a lack of commitment to the top-down assistance programs that have traditionally been offered to disadvantaged communities.

As dismaying as the appointment of someone with no relevant experience to HUD is, a new book shows that it may not be bad news for poor black people that Black Lives Matter's approach to uplift won't be getting much of a hearing in the near future. Michael Woodsworth's *The Battle for Bed-Stuy: The Long War on Poverty in New York City* is intended as a historiographical account but actually serves as a lesson in why, as Ronald Reagan put it, "We fought a war on poverty and we lost," and why reviving the same strategies would, alone, accomplish little more than they did 50 years ago.

Bedford-Stuyvesant is a massive district in Brooklyn that has had a strong concentration of black people since the mid-20th century, competing with more famed Harlem as a fulcrum of New York City's black community. As early as 1977, less than 15 years after the war on poverty had begun, a committee of black veterans of the Great Society efforts in Bed-Stuy convened to discuss "apathy among the Black masses and about the community's seeming inability to find solutions to the nagging social problems" — as if the flood of programs from 1964 had not even happened.

## A legacy of challenges

In 1964's Bed-Stuy, only one in 100 high school seniors were ready for college, and eighth graders' reading skills were two years behind. The Great Society efforts yielded certain improvements, to be sure. Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, and food stamps have improved the quality of life of the black poor. Yet today, Bed-Stuy's public schools remain some of the most underperforming in New York. The problem Great Society efforts focused especially on in the '60s was gangs; today, the neighborhood is still "well known for drive-bys, robberies, murders and assaults."

Describing the Bed-Stuy of the '50s and '60s, Woodsworth sketches a neighborhood where as dismayed as residents were at the time — and as underperforming as institutions like schools were — single parenting was not yet a norm and murder rates were nothing like they have been since. There is a poignancy in the book, with its welter of acronyms (enough to require a key at the front of book) referring to programs that were ardently cherished at the time

but by now forgotten — APOB, CAA, DNS, MFY, R&R, YIA, CHIP (which was something other than today's health insurance program for children).

Today's Workforce Investment Act used to be the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973, which in turn began as the Manpower Development Training Act. President Obama's My Brother's Keeper is a modern version of Bed-Stuy's similarly intentioned Youth in Action program or Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited.

And despite the intense commitment of so very many undersung heroes, many of whom were women giving their lives to the anti-poverty effort while raising children and holding down jobs, none of these early programs made any real difference. Few could deny a simple fact about Bedford-Stuyvesant: There is all but no indication today that a Great Society effort ever occurred.

### **The usual explanations for the war on poverty's failure fall short**

Why didn't the war on poverty work? This is the question that hovers over *The Battle for Bed-Stuy*. The failure is typically flagged by pundits in passing, as if its cause were self-evident. And indeed, Woodsworth describes problems few would find surprising in themselves: bureaucracy and overstaffing (largely on the part of government administrators), inexperience and infighting (largely among black staffers), plus a new "militant" rhetoric longer on theatrics than plans, with young black men disrupting meetings with claims that the black "bourgeoisie" was trying "to make it uptown on the backs of the brothers" and that women community leaders were "emasculating the community and denying us our models of black manhood." Funds also trickled in slowly at first, and Johnson quickly lost interest because of Vietnam.

But the standard narrative of the Great Society's failures sells short just how hard some people strived to make it work. In 1967, Robert Kennedy breathed new life into the efforts in, specifically, Bed-Stuy. So very much happened. A new Central Brooklyn Neighborhood College program, nicknamed the "college of the streets," was educating 500 people in classes held in various buildings in humanities, African history, computer science, and other subjects, while other programs helped people navigate the welfare bureaucracy, advocated for tenants, and formed sanitation drives and baseball leagues.

The Youth in Action program — despite the "youth" in its name, it was an organization central to the entire Bed-Stuy Great Society effort — ran a job placement program, computer education, and a senior citizens council, provided legal services, and set up a community-owned supermarket. The Young Mothers program gave prenatal care, in-house nursing training, sex education, schooling, and job training to 5,000 women, including payment for attending classes, while the Women's Talent Corps provided job training in social service to 1,500 women across New York City.

By 1977 Great Society programs in Bed-Stuy had renovated 3,682 homes, trained 3,835 people in construction, made 1,080 loans, built 500 new units of housing, placed 8,037 people in jobs, hired 512 for job training, and established 128 small businesses and 32 construction firms.

All of this sounds almost like a caricature of state-led uplift for the poor; many thought it was why there were no "long, hot summer" riots in Bed-Stuy. Yet the neighborhood remained helpless in the face of the crack epidemic in the 1980s, and the rest has been, as they say, history. Under an alternate historical scenario, we might have expected all of these efforts to create change if only through sheer momentum. People at the time expected as much, as Woodsworth notes: "The newly employed, it was assumed, would enjoy newfound self-esteem and pride and



offer examples for others.” Others would then follow on the path to employment and stability. But it didn’t happen.

Conventional ideas as to *why* it did not happen, to the extent that they are ever offered, are shaky at best. It is often assumed that the programs were simply underfunded or that there weren’t enough of them — there needed to be “*more programs, more services, more organizations*,” a well-known veteran of civil rights activism I once appeared with on a television show said. But it’s unclear just why the welter of programs described above “weren’t enough.” If instead they actually *had* transformed Bed-Stuy, no one would find that development counterintuitive, wondering how change had happened with so “few” programs.

Equally popular is an idea that what did in neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy was the departure of the black middle class as role models. However, conditions were already at crisis level — in poverty and education, if not drugs and violence — when those very doctors and judges still lived in the neighborhood in the 1960s. Plus, just why would all of the programs and hirings and services that blanketed Bed-Stuy in the ’60s and ’70s require the presence of middle-class people to have success?

### **The role of culture in the perpetuation of poverty**

It is hard to miss that “programs” alone were unable to turn the tide in Bed-Stuy, or elsewhere, and the reason was due to something many social scientists and educated Americans find counterintuitive and even off-putting: that cultural traits and behaviors can persist independently of external conditions. That is, racism can condition legacies, under which behaviors persist even when what originally caused them has receded or even disappeared. One speaks the language one grows up hearing, and culture is not different in this regard, walking in lockstep with neither the GNP nor social tensions. This is hardly cause for dismissal of the problems in question; however, it means that changing conditions is often only part of the battle.

Here, for example, is a depressing but crucial story that one rarely hears. In 1987, philanthropist George Weiss “adopted” 112 inner-city sixth-graders in Philadelphia. He guaranteed them a fully funded education through college as long as they didn’t use drugs, have children out of wedlock, or commit crimes. He provided tutors, workshops, after-school programs, summer programs, and counselors. Yet 45 of the 112 of the children in the program never made it through high school; 19 of the boys were felons by the time they were adults, and more than half of the 45 girls had babies before they were 18 (they had 63 children among them). Obviously, for reasons hardly their fault, the only cultural norms these kids had known affected them profoundly, even with external conditions crafted to nudge them in another direction.

Attitudes toward school can be similarly determined. Black kids started calling each other “white” for liking school only in the late ’60s, when desegregation efforts placed a great many black students in white schools where, in line with the era’s mores, they were subject to openly racist treatment. This made perfect sense. However, that sentiment that school is something other than “black” has persisted over the decades even in well-funded suburban schools where whites are deeply concerned about black students’ performance and social comfort.

Pundits regularly claim that the “acting white” charge is mythical, uncomfortable with the possibility that a black problem could not be due to racism. However, this resistance neglects various studies that confirm the “acting white” charge’s reality and effects, as well as a weight of personal testimony that would be considered authoritative rather than “anecdotal” if it concerned, for example, police brutality.

It was natural in 1964, then, to suppose that what ailed the black community was lack of opportunity — because, quite simply, this indeed was the problem. However, in 2016, what ails the black community is partly lack of opportunity, but also (dare we say) cultural orientations that this lack of opportunity conditioned decades ago. The challenge is that after such cultural orientations have set in, merely pointing people to opportunity can be insufficient as a social uplift strategy — more creative strategies are required.

### **Jobs are scarce, but neighborhood norms regarding work must also be challenged**

For example, increasing the employment rate among young black men will require more than connecting them with jobs, for the simple reason that today, many such men do not work even when jobs are available. Objections that this claim is naive or even racist are understandable, but the weight of evidence for it is so crushing that to disregard it could be seen as racist in itself. No effort to bring poor black men into the workforce will bear real fruit under the pretense that the only problem is unavailability of work.

Even William Julius Wilson's classic work on black poverty, although it focuses on factory relocation and the paucity of transportation to what jobs are still reachable, openly describes black men saying they won't take a job because it would require getting up too early. Political scientist Lawrence Mead has documented and statistically tabulated interviews with young black men, in which large numbers say plenty of jobs are available that they do not take.

It is often supposed that the relocation of low-skill factory jobs explains black unemployment rates, but even in cities where this relocation barely happened, the same unemployment rates exploded starting in the 1970s. The black sociologist Alford Young, in a scholarly and sympathetic description, notes: "They often say they will take whatever work they can get, but a sentence or two later say that certain wages are wholly unacceptable ... some men eventually find jobs but abandon them (if not be dismissed) as soon as problems or tensions arise."

There are no grounds for calling these men lazy. They are often quite industrious within the context of their own lives, but have grown up in communities in which it is not considered abnormal for a man not to work regularly for a living, in a way that it is not in, for example, an affluent white suburb. This norm did not exist before the late 1960s, and began with how much harder it became to get a low-skill factory job at that time; it then was reinforced by a new ideology that questioned buying into the norms of an inherently racist system. All of this was understandable, but one outcome is that today, generations of poor black men have never known anything different.

Thus merely ushering such men into awareness that jobs exist will only do part of the work today. Crucially, one thing that enables the new norm — which abets the avoidance of the traditional labor market — is a standing black market for drugs that allows one to work illegally and make enough money to survive. If there were no war on drugs, and thus drugs could not be sold on the street at a markup, then the men in question would have no choice but to seek legal employment. To claim that they would not seek legal work is to indicate a lack of faith in them that borders on dehumanization.

As such, one thing a Trump administration could do to increase employment among poor black men is to help to end the war on drugs. As a Republican accustomed to bucking his party's traditions, Trump could conceivably be quite comfortable with such an approach, especially as



late in the Obama administration, under the radar, Republicans and Democrats have been coming together on criminal justice reform efforts.

That Trump has stressed "law and order" doesn't seem exactly congruent with a more progressive policy on drugs, but Trump is so fundamentally non-ideological, at heart, that the optimist is hardly crazy to suppose that he could be made to consider changing just what the law, in this case, consists of, in view of enhancing the "order" in question. To end the war on drugs would do much more to change innocently perceived, but damaging, norms in poor black communities as continuing programs such as Obama's My Brother's Keeper.

### **Long-acting reversible contraceptives should be more readily available**

Similarly, it is now a norm in poor communities, white as well as black, for children to be raised by single mothers. As Wilson and others have documented, many such women see little benefit to marrying the men they know given their problems with maintaining employment. However, single mothers can have a hard time finding or maintaining work that can accommodate the unpredictable aspects of having small children. Moreover, it is incontrovertible that children raised by two parents are better off, and as Isabel Sawhill has noted, in the communities in question, pregnancy is quite often accidental: 60 percent of pregnancies outside marriage are unplanned.

The right-wing punditocracy insists that poor (black) people simply need to adopt proper "family values." They stress marriage, with the implication that until they do marry we can feel guiltless in letting them stew in their own juice. However, decades of such calls for black people to just "behave" have borne no fruit, and this approach, complete with its coded dismissal of black humanity, lacks ingenuity. Meanwhile, the Great Society's approach was to help single mothers be as successful in parenthood as possible, which was admirable in getting past the Victorian contempt for unwed mothers that had prevailed so recently before. A modern outgrowth of this approach is calls by thinkers such as Barbara Ehrenreich for employers to adjust to the needs of such single mothers.

However, clearly mothers and children would be better off if single parenthood became an occasional choice and not a norm. A better solution than calling for people to marry more, or hoping corporations will hire workers whose appearance on the job cannot be assured, is a much cleaner solution: long-acting reversible contraception (LARCs), which allows pregnancy to be a choice rather than an accident. An IUD, for example, requires no attendance to contraception at each sexual encounter, and also saves a woman thousands of dollars over five years in comparison with using condoms or birth control pills. In two studies, poor women have praised long-acting reversible contraception and advised that it be more widely available to those who wish to use it.

These two strategies may seem small potatoes compared with the blizzard of top-down strategies that the Black Lives Matter movement advocated or that the Great Society implemented. After 50 years, it can seem as if such an approach is the only plausible one to helping the poor. Such programs can, of course, do some good. Woodsworth's book valuably chronicles the hard work of people it's easy to forget today. Jesse Jackson is a household name today while Bed-Stuy stalwarts like Elsie Richardson are historical footnotes, despite her being an activist radical who first awakened Robert Kennedy to the scale of the neighborhood's problems, leading the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council, which centered Bed-Stuy's neighborhood improvement efforts before the Great Society even kicked in. That is unfair.

Yet the fact remains that people like Richardson, for all that they knew about the problems facing them, had no way of knowing how certain sociohistorical currents were set to waylay even their protean efforts. That is the message of Woodsworth's book when we consider what happened after the events he chronicles.

In 2017, it is worth considering the value of simply creating communities in which women have more control over when they have children, and where more men are legally employed and therefore have better prospects for marriage or long-term relationship commitment. This will allow women to raise their children more often with partners, to the benefit of all concerned. This would seem to be a promising and relatively elementary approach to poverty, and the Trump administration should consider it.

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