

# OPPORTUNITY

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## Editorials

**I**F anyone will take the pains to inquire into the matter he will find that the excessive death rate of Negroes, particularly in the backward regions of the south, where, incidentally, most of them live, has its roots in the same remediable ignorance that afflicted the white population just a few years before.

### Superstition and Health

of superstition and health, has its roots in the same remediable ignorance that afflicted the white population just a few years before.

Fifty years ago surgeons before operating wiped their instruments on their aprons, and eighty years ago, we are reminded by Riebet, doctors were known to bleed a man as many as 200 times within a few months. Doctors of the 16th Century discoursed learnedly on the movements and contortions of demons whom they saw "frolicking and leaping out from the bodies of the possessed when they were exorcised." The average life span was around 25 or 30 years.

We should not be surprised, therefore, when we find Negroes, where they are isolated from the movement of science, clinging with a blind faith to magical formulas, and showing the excesses common to all other untrained minds. Some of the younger Negro physicians have remarked the handicaps to their treatment of certain classes of southern Negroes, present in the persistent dependence of these upon various charms, concoctions and practices based on magic and the supernatural. It is worth while here to quote from a letter of Dr. P. F. Anderson of New York to the Health Department of the city on this matter:

"Ignorance, cherished superstitions and false knowledge often govern Negroes in illnesses and hamper recoveries. Young Negroes show patriarchal obedience to the aged—the aged are, in a large measure, fatalists. They are willing to leave all to whatever their fate may be, the fatalism that has cursed the Orient for centuries. This fatalism exasperates the physician, for it ties his hands and tends to nullify his efforts."

These superstitions are taking a serious toll and obviously have more to do with the excessive death rate than most of the reasons given in the wild talk, even of men who are expected to know, about an inadequate physiological equipment. Not long ago our research department sought to get some of these binding superstitions current in the rural section of the south. To its collection some of the most illuminating were contributed by Dr. Leon Banov, the Health Officer for Charleston County, South Carolina. In these superstitious beliefs, some harmless, others positively dangerous, we can observe the constant handicaps to the work of nature and the physician, in preserving life and health:

Nine wood lice in a little bag around the neck of a baby will assist it in teething.

Kill a young rabbit and rub the fresh brain on the baby's gum to assist it in teething.

In confinement cases the old-fashioned midwives

## Three Scourges of the Negro Family\*

By E. FRANKLIN FRAZIER

IT is proposed here to discuss the effect of three social problems on the Negro: the present disorganization of family life; the problem of poverty; and the problem of health. But before beginning the discussion of these problems, it is necessary to call attention to four factors which accentuate and give a particular cast, as it were, to all problems affecting the Negro.

In the first place, the Negro is segregated more or less throughout the country; and there are forces affecting the world in which he lives and over which he has no control. The second factor is the social history of the Negro which has given him an unique place in our commonwealth. This history is so familiar to most people that it does not need rehearsal here. Third, we need only to be reminded of the extent of ignorance among Negroes to see its special bearing on all his social problems. Ignorance, in the sense we use it here, refers not only to illiteracy and especially the misleading figures so often quoted. We refer to his lack of traditions, knowledge, and ideals which all people acquire by living in the social and physical environment to which they have become adapted. This lack of social intelligence on the part of the Negro is the natural consequence of his having to break away from the folk-ways and more so of an environment without time or opportunity to acquire those of the new environment. Even the fact of so great illiteracy in America where literacy is so necessary to normal living must give askew to the social problems of the Negro. The fourth factor which makes a special consideration of the Negro of pragmatic value is his economic position.

This fourth consideration deserves some discussion. In one sense the Negro's economic position which, as for instance among a large part of the agricultural population, approaches the condition of poverty, might be considered a part of the great problem of poverty. But we are concerned chiefly with his relation to the whole economic structure and the character of his economic life. According to the 1920 census, 22.1 per cent of all Negroes

*Mr. Frazier in this article introduces a new and stimulating candor to the discussion of those very commonplace problems which impinge so heavily upon a vast and, for the most part inarticulate group of the Negro population. His attention is turned to that group most easily forgotten by the race orators and too easily remembered by those who see only an unredeemable backwardness in the Negro race. On the assumption that before difficulties can be removed they must be recognized, he speaks of family disorganization where it exists, out of an experience as teacher, head of a school of Social Work in Atlanta, Georgia, and an unillusioned student of Negro problems.*

over 10 years of age gainfully employed were in domestic and personal services; and 45.2 per cent in agriculture. The immigrant group with about the same percentage of its population in gainful occupations are represented in the manufacturing and mechanical industries to about the same extent as the Negro in agriculture. The decrease of 10.5 per cent in agricultural pursuits and the increase of 6.2 per cent in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits from 1910

to 1920 are both indications of a change in the character of some of the problems. We are still faced with the fact that 22.1 per cent—an increase of 1.5 per cent—are in domestic and personal services; and the fact of even greater significance that nearly half of the working population is in agriculture. The latter represents two thirds of the entire Negro population. This background of the Negro group sketched in even so brief an outline will help our understanding of the social problems as they affect the Negro.

We shall consider first the problem of the family. It has been touched by all the factors operating to destroy the semi-patriarchal family in America. But the strain on the integrity of the Negro family has been a double one. It was first burdened with 250 years of promiscuous sex relations. This was what slavery gave in exchange for the polygamous institutions of Africa. On the other hand, just at the time the Negro was struggling to build up regulated sex relations, there were assaults upon the only marital relation according to which he could model his own family life. These influences, such as the growth of modern industrialism, the decay of religious control, urbanization and the larger freedom of women have all affected Negro families. It is not surprising that their family life without the support of custom and a venerated tradition, has tended towards instability, but rather that it has shown such vitality. While we appreciate the position of those who feel that because the Negro is not over-burdened with an outworn tradition he might contribute to a more rational attitude towards sex relations, it cannot be denied that at the present time the normal functioning of

\* A paper read before the National Urban League Conference in New York on February 3rd, 1926.

the family is necessary in order to save us from many of our problems.

Let us consider the economic forces which help to bring about the disintegration of Negro family life. Negroes are found in the poorest paid occupations. They form the great unskilled auxiliary to many skilled occupations. In the South where manual labor is still considered dishonorable for white men, Negroes who work with white men often appear ridiculously redundant. Thus, the family incomes of Negroes approach a very low subsistence level. During periods of economic depression, he is often the most easily dispensed with. Many Negroes are employed in what we know as odd jobs. We see, therefore, that the family income which does not permit a reserve is even uncertain at that. With people living on such a level the slightest cessation of income brings a crisis in the family. Even the heads of families with more moral support than the head of the Negro family finds and has within himself, will often throw up the whole matter and desert. Those who deal with broken homes among Negroes have often attributed the frequency of desertion to some inherent lack of certain moral fibre. They have overlooked the tendency of all human beings to run away from unpleasant situations as well as the strain on the feeble sentiments which Negroes have acquired in social isolation.

Another source of strain on the Negro home which is largely economic, is the high birth-rate. This high birth-rate among Negroes is a characteristic of all people on a low culture level. Many heads of Negro families in spite of their proverbial optimism, see only an untoward Providence piling up liabilities. A railroad ticket gives an easy release.

In the rural South where the majority of the Negroes live the agricultural system is unfavorable to a stable family life. The majority of Negro farmers are the poorest type of tenants. A precarious living is secured from year to year. Many of the farmers find themselves in debt constantly with more children to support. It is customary for many farmers to leave home after harvest and supplement their incomes by working in saw-mills with their labor camp and in the nearby cities. This practice has dated largely from the migrations during the World War. There is much moving from farm to farm with little opportunity to make the home a true center of family life. The absence in the South of a real rural civilization is caused by the one crop system. The effect of the system upon family life is only one aspect of the problem.

The migration of the Negro from the South has affected the family North and South. Social workers in the North have been burdened with the problems in the new environment. Such problems as housing, unemployment, health and crime have taxed their resources and ingenuity. This side of the picture is better known to Northern social workers than the Southern side. The migrations meant in many cases the loss of the father through

death or desertion. In a survey I made recently of a rural community in Alabama I found about two thirds of the families without fathers. These families had lost the father through desertions and death during the migrations. Most of the families suffering the loss of the father were those on the lowest economic level. The low economic status of these people was also responsible for the annual migrations of the fathers to the cities to supplement their family income. The present tendency is to seek employment in nearby Southern cities instead of long profitless journeys to the North. The migrations have also created in the Negro a habit to move about the country without any specific aim. There is an urban problem in the South which has been created by the constant migrations from the country to the city. It is just as acute as the Northern problems in some cases.

Another economic factor helping the disorganization of Negro family life is the large number of Negro women in gainful occupations. According to 1920 census 38.9 per cent of Negro women of 10 years and over were gainfully employed. From the same source we learn that 44.9 per cent of colored women over 15 years of age employed are married. This figure does not include the widowed and divorced, who in many cases have family responsibilities. A study of the family status of bread-winning women in four selected cities by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor showed the following situation which may be taken as typical for colored women in Southern cities. In Jacksonville, Florida, we find first that 73.1 per cent of the married women employed who had husbands as bread-winners, were colored. Colored women made up 84.7 per cent of the married women with husbands not living with their families. Of more interest to us is the fact that 41.3 per cent of the 8,394 Negro women at work had children. Concerning the children of the remaining women with no children in the family circle we know nothing. We know how easy it is in Southern cities especially for Negro women to place their children in the so-called orphanages. But statistics do not bring before us vividly enough the picture of the Negro home where the mother is forced to supplement the family income. It is only when we face the situation of hundreds of homes in every city where the children are locked out or in the house until the father or mother returns in the evening that we get a true picture of this situation.

From the economic factors descriptive of family life among Negroes we pass on to a brief mention of less apparent forces that cannot be overlooked. The first is the decay of religious control over family relations. I do not mean to imply that religious belief has been shaken to any considerable extent throughout the Negro population. I wish to call your attention to two ways that religious control has been weakened. In the first place the church does not occupy as large a place as a source of social control as it did formerly. The spread

of education and general intelligence, and such influences as the movies are now competing forces. Secondly, among Negroes who have migrated to cities, it is impossible for the church to keep a very close watch over behavior as in the country. Moreover, in the city the church loses considerably among the younger Negroes the prestige it possessed in the country. While the country church tries in vain to enforce its restrictions upon certain forms of recreation, the city church admits its helplessness.

Another insidious force against Negro family life which appears to me of importance is the large number of Negroes in domestic and personal services. I have special reference to those who work in hotels, clubs, and places of recreation. Negroes in such places observe white people not in the course of their normal life but mostly on holiday or parade. These servants carry over into their everyday behavior many practices which are inimical to normal family life. They often imitate standards of expenditure which are neither applicable to their economic or social position in their racial group. I admit this view of the effects of so many Negroes in this type of service to be based upon my own observations.

Finally, I wish to mention another influence which must be considered in any attempt at the rehabilitation of the Negro family. This is the attitude of the courts and other white people in the South who deal with Negroes. You are doubtless aware that there is still a general tendency in the South to scoff at regulated sex relations among Negroes. Typical of this attitude was the advertisement of a large white Baptist church which urged all the citizens to come out to a concert and enjoy the fun of a Negro wedding. They promised a real exhibition of "nigger culture." Even when problems of broken homes come before courts, the judges constantly refuse to take the marital relation seriously. Often the wife is dismissed with an intimation that the judge has no time to worry with such matters affecting Negroes. The sympathy of the court is more often with the deserting husband.

In connection with the problem of the broken home we must not overlook the question of child welfare. We have already touched upon this and sufficient has been said to show the plight of the Negro child where family life is so unstable. To a certain extent we must recognize forces in our civilization which are changing the character of the family group and the nature of the home. Probably the home will never again be the center of industry and recreation. In progressive communities where there is an intelligent appreciation of this fact, social inventions are being used to afford an opportunity for the adequate expression of normal human impulses. I want to emphasize the fact that problems affecting child life are accentuated among Negroes because in many cases Negro children are denied the advantage of these social inventions. The Boy Scouts is a conspicuous example. In all of the states of the lower South

Negro boys are not even allowed to form separate scout troops. To get playgrounds for colored children is often considered a triumph of interracial goodwill and Negro statesmanship. We gather figures about delinquency of Negro children, while we leave them to take their first lessons in crime in street gangs in preparation for the chain gangs. Likewise with the Juvenile Court which was a social invention for treating delinquent children according to our newer conceptions of individual responsibility and human behavior. Yet the Negro child with his burden of ignorance and poverty of social tradition must answer for his behavior according to adults. Not only are most Southern cities without facilities for handling juvenile colored delinquents but in three Southern states delinquent Negro girls are either turned back upon society or sent to the chain-gang. There is not time to go into the disposition of young colored dependents who are passed around as souvenirs or placed in an orphanage, probably to be used as a tool for exploiting sentimental white people.

I have emphasized the problem of family disorganization because I feel it lies at the basis of many of the Negro's problems. Take for example the high rate of illegitimacy among Negroes. While it is certainly correlated with poverty and ignorance, it cannot be denied that where there is a normal family life with its safeguards for the daughters, the probability of illegitimacy is reduced to a minimum. This emphasis is given in no spirit of a sentimental lament. We must recognize the place of big economic forces which are to a large extent beyond our control. Yet the substitution of institutional and other forms of control will be of little consequence as long as we permit the fundamental social unit in our society to go to pieces.

The second problem which concerns us is the problem of poverty. We have no exact figures on the extent of poverty among Negroes. Professor Ellwood believes that 50 to 75 per cent of all Negroes live on an economic level which should be designated as poverty. The fact that in Washington, D. C., where Negroes constitute 29 per cent of the population they furnish 84 per cent of the pauper burials; and in Charleston where they make up 52.8 per cent of the population they furnish 96 per cent, has been brought to the support of such a high estimate. Regardless of the validity of this estimate the testimonies of family welfare societies, poor wardens, churches and fraternal orders all give color to the opinion that poverty is very widespread among Negroes.

The problem of poverty seems to be fundamental. But when we examine the causes of poverty we find other more fundamental causes operative. Among these causes are ignorance, poor health, and the lack of certain social training. Only about 7 per cent of the nearly 5,000,000 Negroes engaged in gainful employment are skilled and semi-skilled laborers. The great mass of them are in those forms of employment that are irregular and seasonal. While many persons are thoroughly ac-

quainted with urban poverty, they have little conception of rural poverty. Country life has been glossed over in somewhat the same manner as the primitive man of poetic imagination. We have already referred to the low economic status of the Negro farmer in the South. Among such farmers there is real poverty. However strange it may sound many suffer for the lack of food, not to mention clothes. Attendance in the schools of the South is constantly affected by the poverty of the children. Many are kept away because of malnutrition and lack of clothes and illness resulting therefrom.

The influence of the widespread poverty of Negroes cannot be traced in all of its ramifications. It affects the housing and health problem. We should note several other facts related to this problem. While many observers see nothing but bad results in the long run in the Negro's leaving the country to become a proletarian of the city, those who are acquainted with the rural background of many Negroes realize that adequate pay in cities will improve his social position fundamentally. We should also note the influence of Negro insurance companies which almost with a missionary spirit are getting Negroes to save a part of their income. This is saving many families from poverty which would normally have resulted from the loss of the wage earner. Finally it must be noted that the artificial restriction of the Negro to certain occupations without reference to ability is a distinct economic loss to his group.

The problem of health, which we shall consider next, is generally classified as one of the major social problems. Sickness stands out conspicuously as the cause of family disorganization and the loss of economic efficiency. This is of special importance in the case of the Negro who is constantly burdened with poor health, bordering on total disability. In spite of this burden the Negro has increased in this country and the conclusions drawn from military examinations and experiences are that the Negro is a better physiological machine than the white man. Moreover indications are that the Negro is making headway against his high death rate. From 1910 to 1922 his death rate for the whole registration area decreased from 24.1 per 1,000 to 15.7. The decrease for Negroes was 12 per cent greater than that for whites. The most significant decrease was for tuberculosis. "In 1911," according to the Negro Year Book, "tuberculosis was responsible for 418 deaths for each 100,000 colored persons insured in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. In 1922, the rate was 244 or 42 per cent less." The case of syphilis presents a less encouraging picture. The death rate from syphilis, locomotor ataxia and general paralysis of the insane of those insured in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company showed an increase from 1911 to 1923 among the white of 9.4 per cent among the colored of 89.7 per cent. It is possible that part of this enormous increase among Negroes can be attributed to better diagnosis. Sta-

tistics of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company indicate that the life expectancy of the Negro has increased five years since 1912. The successful struggle against disease is especially significant in view of the meagre resources the Negro has at his disposal to conserve his health. The public health program scarcely touches the Negro in the South. The mass of Negroes still depend upon the quackeries of ignorant white doctors and the magic of Negro midwives. Negro doctors are denied an opportunity to increase their efficiency by clinical practice even with colored patients. These are some of the obstacles that stand in the way of further advances in health.

The other side of the health problem has to do with mental deficiency. While the Southern states as far as I know provide for the Negro insane, I do not know of any state that gives any attention to the feeble-minded. The fact that the Negro lives largely in the rural South, the feeble-minded can be employed on the farm and in simple tasks on the roads. They have multiplied doubtless beyond what a sound social policy should have permitted. They have made a large contribution to the number of criminals. The result of the absence of social control of the feeble-minded is illustrated by the case of a feeble-minded Negro boy who was lynched. He had the habit as he went about grinning at addressing all women. The tragedy occurred when he addressed a white woman.

A final mention should be made of the effect of the health problem on family life. The high death rate among Negroes surely removes a large number of wage earners from the family. The loss of the wage earners brings a profound crisis in the Negro home. As a rule it means the breaking up of the family. The older children enter employment prematurely and the younger children are scattered in orphanages of doubtful standing or among neighbors who exploit them more often than they give them a chance in life.

The chief need of the Negro, as I see it, is socialization. This involves at least an elementary education which will give him an understanding of his social and physical environment. He needs such knowledge as will enable him to function as an individual capable of self-direction. In order to do this he must be able to make a living and keep himself in sound health. If the Negro family can be made a functioning social unit, it will secure the child this training as far as there are schools and other available resources. I do not mean to minimize the importance of the Negro school with its intelligent leadership which furnishes the leavening for the masses. The Negro school, because of its unique role in the socialization of the Negro, requires even more than white schools a visiting teacher or some organization to link it up with the home life of the child. In such matters as sound hygiene the school makes a more valuable contribution than the average Negro home. When

*(Continued on page 234)*

Net said, "Your poppa wants to read. Stop your noise, Daisy."

She obediently stopped both her noise and the phonograph, took up her book, and became absorbed. Millie went on with her sewing in placid anticipation of the morrow. Net immediately began to nod, gave a curious snort, slept.

Silence. That crowded in on him, engulfed him. That blurred his vision, dulled his brain. Vast, white, impenetrable. . . . His ears strained for the old, familiar sound. And silence beat upon them. . . . The words of the evening paper jumbled together. He read: J. P. Morgan goes—

It burst upon him. Blinded him. His hands groped for the bulge beneath his coat. Why this—this was the end! The end of those great moments—the end of everything! Bewildering pain tore through him. He clutched at his heart and felt, almost, the jagged edges drive into his hand. A lethargy swept down upon him. He could not move, nor utter sound. He could not pray, nor curse.

Against the wall of that silence J. Lucius Jones crashed and died.

### *Three Scourges of the Negro Family*

(Continued from page 213)

it comes to teaching habits of industry I doubt the superior efficiency of the school. To ignore the present disintegration of Negro family life and to shift the task to other agencies and the schools even when they pretend to give the Negro "an industrial education," seems to me to be neglecting the most important influence in socializing the Negro. This does not mean that we should not use all of those modern social inventions that are supplementing family control. They are probably needed more in the case of the Negro family than in the case of the whites. But social invention often depends upon the proper functioning of the home in order to be effective.

The economic factors in the Negro problem are in many cases beyond immediate control. The Negro will free himself to some extent as he acquires education, technical skill and overcomes the burden of disease. Let us not forget that the pall of ignorance makes the burden of all of these heavier.

### *Skilled Negro Workmen*

(Continued from page 226)

and Willie are all coming back, and they are good enough for me." Now, no one has a greater appreciation of the definite line of demarcation between the servant and master than my family and I, nor a greater distaste for trespass on either side, but we interpret that relationship as did Jesus, and make it a beautiful thing rather than a vulgar one. The result is love, obedience and cheerfulness on one side, and gentleness and equal love on the other.

# The National Urban League

Organized 1910—Incorporated 1913

127 East 23rd Street  
New York City

The National Urban League is an organization which seeks to improve the relations between the races in America and the living conditions among Negroes in cities.

It conducts an industrial department to help remove the color line from industry.

The League makes surveys of Negro life as a basis for practical work and publishes OPPORTUNITY magazine.

The Executive Boards of the national and of the forty local organizations are made up of white and colored people who have caught the vision of social work and believe in justice and fair play in the dealing of men with each other.

The "Survey" says: "The League has through its technical and scientific approach brought to bear upon the race question the most sustained modern and practical influence that has yet been organized. The program was far-sightedly started in advance of a need which the migration of Negroes to the industrial and city centers has made so acute that we must view the National Urban League as bearing for the moment the brunt of the active present-day program of adjustment, and therefore, as being one of the most useful social work agencies of the country."

The League solicits contributions to aid in carrying out its program which in 1926 will cost \$60,000. One may designate his gift for any specific phase of the work.

**L. HOLLINGSWORTH WOOD**  
CHAIRMAN

**LLOYD GARRISON**  
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EXECUTIVE SECRETARY